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The tragic happenings in Ireland at the beginning of this century have left us with a legacy and a solution that no at the time really wanted, including the Unionists. We have been left with two confessional states, neither of which is worthy of the best of the Irish people, and both of which in their own way and because of their very nature, have contributed to a narrowness and insularity that have prevented the development of the generosity of spirit and breadth of vision necessary so that we might solve in a manner acceptable to all, the problem of division in Ireland.

It was probably inevitable after the bitterness of the happenings of the beginning century that attitudes to the border on both sides should largely be an emotional reaction rather than a reasoned position. The result has been to many that Irish Unity has come to mean the conquest of one state by the other rather a partnership of both where both traditions combine in agreement to create a new society in Ireland, a pluralist society where all traditions are cherish and flourish equally. It must be quite astonishing and puzzling to outsiders to note that while countries like France and Germany who only 25 years ago were engaged in mutual carnage are today building bonds of friendship, in Ireland there is little or no sign of the communities coming together. It seems somewhat contradictory that each part of Ireland seems willing to participate separately in the planned integration of Europe but not in the planned integration of this little island. The narrowness and insularity has meant an unwillingness to abandon fixed positions lest there would appear to be concessions given to 'the other side'. Such attitudes lead inevitably, as they have done, to open conflict with such tragic consequences for the whole community. If we do not move away from our fixed positions then conflict will break out again in the future.

Thankfully there is a new generation today that is on the whole untouched by the bitterness of the happenings at the beginning of the century, and who are in a position to make a more rational assessment of the situation. Another welcome change in the situation has been the greater and deeper understanding of the Northern Problem that has been developing South of the border. The border in Ireland is the psychological barrier between two sections of the community in the North built on prejudice, sectarianism and fear. To remove it requires the eradication of sectarianism and prejudice. This can only come through the development of understanding and friendship. This is the real task which faces anyone who genuinely wants to solve the Irish problem. The weakness of this approach is that it is undramatic. It does not offer an instant and glorious solution. It offers only a hard, unpopular road of accepting that it will take patience and a long-term plan which should be worked out painstakingly. Its virtue is that it is the only road.

It cannot come about by coercion or violence, because a problem of sectarian division and prejudice is only deepened and strengthened by violence. It would not resemble in any way the unity that seems to be envisaged by some of those in Dublin who talk of their 'own people' and whose loudly proclaimed pure republicanism seems to me to be nothing more than the pursuit of 'Catholic victory'. An essential first step along this road is equality and justice in the North. Equal citizenship is an essential prerequisite to the reconciliation that is necessary to break down the sectarian barriers in the North. When these barriers go the real border will have gone and the solution to what has become known as the Irish problem will be easy to achieve.

In this regard right wing Unionists are right when they say that reform and civil rights can lead to an end of Northern Ireland as they know it. But where they are wrong is to assume it will lead them into an Ireland where the Northern Protestant will be trampled on and his rights of conscience infringed. No one is entitled to assume that when we talk of unity we are talking of assimilation into the present state south of the border. Such unity as is envisaged would be a unity under an entirely new constitution one which all sections would have a say in drafting and one which would provide a framework for a pluralist society in Ireland in which the rights of conscience and religious liberty would be upheld. It would be a society than would be much richer than what we have known in that it would have the full and free participation of all our traditions, unfettered by the negative dissensions that have wasted so much energy in the past, energy which would then be devoted to the positive construction of the whole country.

More and more Northern Protestants are today questioning their real identity and are prepared to openly discuss the pros and cons of a united country. They are disenchanted and disillusioned with the instability of the Northern state and they realise that the Unionist Party can only survive as a party of prejudice and sectarianism.

In short to create a truly united country we need a truly united people, not a united piece of earth. In that task we need not to overcome the Northern protestant but to seek his cooperation, help and assistance. When he realises fully that a unity sought with his agreement and his participation then surely a vision opens up of an Ireland that can be an example to other countries in the world with serious and bitter problems of community division. Is there any other way in which we can create a society in Ireland where Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter can work together as equals for the betterment of us all? Those are the sentiments of a Northern protestant who founded the republican tradition in Ireland.