

Ireland - The Way Forward.  
John Hume - Deputy Leader of S.D.L.P.

(1977)

There has been violence in Northern Ireland every decade since the statelet was set up in 1920. In the past decade, the violence has been continuous but too often, as now, violence has served as a smokescreen to hide the real problem. One of the tragedies of the past ten years is that violence has come to be regarded as the problem, instead of a horrible symptom of a much more deep-seated political question. With the decline in violent activity, is it not time to take a fresh look at ways whereby the political deadlock may be confronted?

Since the British Government of the day drew a border between both parts of Ireland in 1920 thereby creating Northern Ireland with a deliberately manufactured majority in favour of continued union with Britain, the basis of British policy towards Northern Ireland has been that the area shall remain part of the United Kingdom as long as a majority of people there so wish. This is not a neutral position. It guarantees the position of Unionist politicians who, since 1974, have rejected British proposals for devolved government in Northern Ireland involving both sections of the community. Is it unreasonable to suggest that this open-ended guarantee has not been a particularly successful basis of policy? Has it produced stability? Has it produced peace? These are questions that ought to be asked by responsible politicians in Britain and ought to be answered by a responsible government.

Indeed, there are grounds for arguing strongly that rather than producing the basis for an agreement, these British guarantees to the Unionists foster a siege mentality and operate as a barrier to a real and lasting settlement which can only come when political representatives of both sections of the Irish people sit down and hammer out an agreement amongst themselves. As long as Britain continues her present policy there is absolutely no incentive for the Unionist political leadership to talk to anyone. If Britain were to guarantee Ian Smith that white Rhodesians could remain linked to Britain as long as they wished, would he ever talk to the leaders of the black population other than on his own terms? While Britain tells the Unionist population of Northern Ireland that they can remain in the United Kingdom as long as they wish, will they ever talk in meaningful terms to the people with whom they share the island of Ireland?

The real security of the Unionist population of Northern Ireland rests on their own strength of numbers and their own distinctive traditions and as a leading Protestant clergyman in Northern Ireland recently urged, the Unionist people should negotiate their own future now, rather than leave it to the whims of a British parliament. Until this is accepted, politics in Northern Ireland will not be about meaningful dialogue between both sections of the

community but will rather be a competition by each side to win British support.

It is one thing to suggest that the time has come for Britain to withdraw her guarantees to the Unionists. What then? There are those who suggest that she should simply declare her intention to withdraw and leave the people in Ireland, North and South, to sort it out amongst themselves. This approach is fraught with serious risks for the future peace and stability of Ireland. Britain is part of the problem, she must be part of the solution.

Reconciliation is clearly an objective that would command the respect and support of all right thinking people. Should that not be the stated policy of the British Government? Britain should declare that her policy objective in Ireland is to promote the coming together of both parts of Ireland in agreement before withdrawing and should encourage the creation of structures of government in Ireland that will allow both traditions to flourish freely and live together in unity, agreement and independence with clear guarantees for the rights of all. Such a policy, of course, would place heavy responsibilities on the Government and people of the Republic of Ireland. It is not unfair to suggest that until recent times, Irish unity was no more than a mere emotional party political slogan. Hence it was easy

for Unionist politicians in the North to represent unity as conquest of the North by the South and as absorption of the Protestant people into a Catholic state. The time has come for the parties and the Government of the Republic to spell out what they mean by unity and what sort of Ireland they envisage. It is essential that it be made clear that the Ireland that we seek is not the United Ireland of old, dominated by one tradition but is in effect an Agreed Ireland, whose institutions and government would reflect both its unity and its diversity. In short, there should be no doubt whatsoever that the object is a pluralist Ireland and that the Protestant people of the North would have a positive and guaranteed role to play.

In a century which has seen European nations that slaughtered millions of each other's citizens come together and agree institutions that allow them to grow together by agreement, is it too much to ask that the people of Ireland do likewise? Is it too much to ask that British politicians make it their stated policy to help bring this about?

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