

Boston Conference 1982

At a conference in Boston in 1982 ? John Hume and Harold McCusker, then MP for Armagh, debated the British guarantee that there would be no change in Northern Ireland's constitutional position unless a majority so decided and Hume's demand that it should be removed to create a context more favourable to negotiations. McCusker claimed that such a demand was essentially a recipe for coercing Unionists into a united Ireland. In his reply Hume argued that the unionist majority was:

... created by drawing the Irish border in a manner that created a deliberate majority based on sectarianism and, from the very beginning, I believe that the Protestant population was trapped by that into sectarian solidarity as a means of maintaining that (majority). Any politician who moved out of that solidarity position was immediately regarded as selling the pass. That is the meaning of 'not an inch'.

And therefore that effectively meant that there was no dialogue with the minority. Rather it was that the minority was treated as the enemy, and the history of Northern Ireland shows that successive unionist governments treated the minority as infiltrators, as the enemy, as people not to be trusted, as people to be deprived of electoral rights, of housing, and of jobs. ...

Why is it that the only part of the world where it is wrong that we suggest that people unite is Ireland? And when I talk about unity I'm not talking about coercion. What I am talking about is sitting down and agreeing how 5 million people in an island that you could put into a corner of Long Island agree structures to protect what we want to protect. What do the Protestant people want to protect? Is it their Protestantism or their Britishness, or both? If it is then we can build structures to protect them. What does the Catholic population want to protect? Is it their Irishness, their Catholicism, or what? If it is, then we can build structures to protect them. What we have to agree is what we have to protect ...

I am not asking for anyone to be coerced because I don't believe that you can solve problems by coercing people. What I am saying is that the arrangements we have had up to now have, to put it very mildly, been a failure and that it's not unreasonable to ask for new structures which will protect what people want to protect. In asking for new structures I'm asking that they be worked out by agreement between the different people involved with Britain playing a role in bringing about such an agreement. I have suggested what I would like to see coming out at the end (a form of confederal Ireland) but I think there might be other suggestions people might like to make and I would be open to them. All I would like to ask is that what would come out at the end that each section's basic identity – what they want to protect – is protected. There are different formulas to do this. I have suggested one but there are others...

My point about the guarantee was not a point about sovereignty. Northern Ireland was deliberately created on a sectarian headcount. You then having created a Protestant majority say to them 'you can stay linked to us as long as you have a majority'. I contend that implicit in that you are forcing the Protestant population into sectarian solidarity and you're building sectarianism into the foundations of Northern Ireland and I would submit that there is 60 years of evidence of elections to prove it that every election is a sectarian headcount. I am further saying that it prevents dialogue. It prevents any leadership emerging on the unionist side which looks to an accommodation

of any description, including the simple sharing of administrative power in Northern Ireland ... That approach by Britain is a serious obstacle to dialogue ... That is at the heart of the matter.

Asked about his willingness to accept a devolved government for Northern Ireland Hume said:

I have served in a devolved government in Northern Ireland. It didn't last too long – it only lasted 5 months. I would be certainly in favour of it if I was sure that it could provide the facility for stability and peace. That's what the negotiations of the past 10 years have been all about trying to ensure that each identity was protected. We had the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 which was an agreement that in Northern Ireland there would be a partnership between the two communities in government and that there would be agreement between North and South in the form of a Council of Ireland. That again was a very good agreement. I think it was brought down by people who said things about it that were simply not true..I thought that agreement was such that people working together within the North, and North and South working together that relationships would evolve and in order to protect against the fears that Harold would want to represent we, that my party, proposed that when that Council of Ireland would be set up it would consist of 7 ministers from each side of the border and that any one minister would have a veto which would mean that if something was proposed that Unionists in the North thought would affect their vital interests they could block it. Yet this was represented to people as another form of conquest ... the most serious problem we have is a whole question of distrust.