

DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM:

A STRUCTURE AND A STRATEGY

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"A week is a long time in politics", said Harold Wilson. He was right. Yet I think that where the Irish problem and divisions in the North of Ireland are concerned most people would agree that a year is a very short time indeed. Yet that will not prevent the critics of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, most of them with vested interests, from wishful thinking that the Anglo-Irish Agreement has failed or is fading away.

From the very beginning we in the SDLP have made clear that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is not a solution to the Irish problem but a framework within which the process that will lead to a solution will take place. Is there anyone on this island or anywhere else who thinks that this problem and the divisions between Catholic and Protestant in the North can be healed in a week, a month or a year? Is there anyone who does not believe that the best way to solve the problem peacefully is that the two governments should work together? Is there anyone who does not believe that in the long process of healing the divide that there will not be upsets, disappointments, setbacks? Or are we to be forever subject to the begrudger mentality, so prevalent in this island and a serious obstacle to progress, which never recognises what has been achieved but insists in condemning what has not been achieved thus rendering steady progress impossible.

What has been achieved? The two governments, as a result of an international agreement are sitting together at a permanent conference table dealing with the problems of Northern Ireland. That is a very far reaching step the significance of which has been underestimated by all the critics except the Unionists. If the public were to read tomorrow morning that a permanent Anglo-Argentine Conference had been set up to deal with the problem of the Falkland Islands would the world, as it did in our case, not applaud a significant development?

That permanent intergovernmental framework is the means whereby the steady process of building a solution to our deep seated problem can take place if those who are party to the problem have the will to take the opportunities presented. It is also the best way because it proceeds with the consensus of the 5.9 million people of both islands rather than with the veto of 1% of them. In addition the framework will survive existing governments so that future governments can continue the building process until the final stability.

Some governments may move slowly, others more quickly. All will have the opportunity. Compare that approach to the total lack of either achievement or progress between 1920 and 1970? Will a generation of such steady building not be much more productive than a generation of whingeing? Or have the begrudgers got a short-cut that they have not yet told us about? —

The Unionist political leadership recognises that they have lost their unconditional veto, a veto which in our view goes to the heart of the problem and the removal of which is an essential first step on the road to a solution. Not only did that veto not serve the people of Northern Ireland well, it did an extreme disservice to the unionist people themselves in setting them apart from their neighbours and from those with whom they share this piece of earth, thus ensuring permanent instability. In addition the muscle of that veto was the ability of the Unionist leadership to blackmail and threaten any British Government that tried to tamper with the veto. The success of that blackmail confirmed leadership in uncompromising hands and convinced some in the nationalist community that only violence worked. That vicious circle has paralysed political development and has damaged all sections of our community. In cutting through that vicious circle and standing firm against blackmail the present British Government is doing a service to our whole community and is creating the circumstances where dialogue without domination can take place. In that stand both they and the Irish Government deserve the solidarity of all right thinking people on both islands because it is crucial to the eventual resolution of this conflict. When that dialogue takes place is a matter for the Unionist leadership. We are ready when they are and they should remember that as long as they refuse, then all decisions will be taken within the new process which basically is Direct Rule with an Irish Government input and from the viewpoint of SDLP supporters that is better than anything we have had to date. We would prefer to begin the process of breaking down the barriers between us which can only be done by working together to build our Community in partnership. So our offer of talks on the subject remains on the table. The challenge to the Unionist community is whether they have the self confidence to deal as equals with their fellow citizens and to recognise that the traditional "ourselves alone" approach has little to offer either themselves or the community as a whole by way of peace, justice or stability. Have they the self confidence to recognise that they are their own best guarantors and

that the Anglo Irish Agreement was made necessary by their failure to accommodate with their fellow citizens, and it now offers them and us the opportunity to create what is the essence of every democratic society - accommodation of differences.

There is also a major challenge to the nationalist tradition both constitutional and paramilitary. The British Government have declared in the Anglo Irish Agreement that Irish unity is a matter for those Irish people who want it persuading those who do not. Is Irish nationalism/republicanism prepared to face up to that challenge? Distinguished historical figures of different ages such as Tone, Parnell and Sean Lemass have all in their own way said the same thing that Irish Unity and freedom is a matter for Irish people and it is a matter of persuading the Protestant minority in Ireland in particular. It is quite clear from that challenge that violence will not only drive people further apart but it is an expression of a total lack of self confidence by those who perpetrate it. Is Provisional Sinn Fein prepared to join in taking up that peaceful challenge? For constitutional nationalists I think it fair to say that no party in this century has taken up the challenge of setting out and working through the long term process that is necessary to achieve Irish unity. The Anglo-Irish Agreement is a challenge to cut out the rhetoric, to stop talking about Irish unity and to start working for it. For its part, the SDLP has set out its three stage strategy - on many occasions. We are willing to discuss that strategy with all constitutional parties with a view to improving and developing it and in particular to ensure that there is a common and solid strategy being pursued by all constitutional nationalists throughout Ireland both within and without the Anglo-Irish Agreement. I presume that all constitutional parties in Ireland who share the aspiration agree that solidarity of approach and strategy is an essential element in ensuring steady progress.

In the meantime and in the short term the Anglo-Irish Conference has been dealing with the internal grievances within Northern Ireland that it promised to address in the communique accompanying the agreement one year ago. We have repeatedly said that these grievances, important in themselves, are but symptoms of the deeper problem of division. If they were all resolved tomorrow they would recur in one form or another if we do not address the underlying problem. The permanent structures set up by the Anglo-Irish Agreement are, as I have indicated above, the means of dealing with the

problem but the immediate grievance have to be tackled and most of the judgements being passed on the agreement are based on people's perceptions of the progress made in dealing with them.

Quite a lot of progress, contrary to the perception being promoted by opponents of the agreement, has been made. Ending a serious hunger strike earlier this year was one of the first acts of the Conference. Progress has been made on a number of other issues which although not major have been sources of irritations throughout years of Unionist rule and pressure for change was consistently resisted eg street names in Irish, registration of I Voters and reform of Flags and Emblems legislation. On a more meaningful note the decision to demolish both Divis and Rosville Flats has been taken. Major proposals for Police complaints procedures similar to those obtaining elsewhere have been tabled by the British Government for discussion and the SDLP has put its own proposals. Movement is clearly under way. Similarly on the Fair Employment front. Again a major discussion paper detailing the Full extent of religious discrimination with new proposals including sanctions against guilty employees for dealing with it has been tabled by the Government. Again the the SDLP has joined in the discussion by submitting our own proposals and new legislation is under way. The same commitment has been expressed in relation to Human Rights. The Irish Government has submitted a far reaching proposal for a Bill of Rights and the British Government has responded with proposals for a Declaration of Rights. Again clear movement is under way. On the economic front a substantial International fund has been set up to help areas of high unemployment and the Newry - Dundalk area has benefited with improved road proposals.

There has been some disappointment about lack of movement in the crucial area of the administration of justice and in particular the Diplock Courts. The British Government has rejected Irish Government proposals for a three judge court but since the agreement recognises that there is a problem in this area the British Government has a responsibility to now bring forward its own proposals and to come to agreement with the Irish Government. In the same area it is clear that progress has been made in bringing the Supergrass system to an end and proposals for legislation to amend the Emergency Provisions Act in relation to arrest, bail and length of remand are on the table for the present session of the House of Commons. Not bad for one year I would argue, particularly when compared to the total lack of movement on many of these issues over

many years. In short politics and the political process set up by the agreement is actively working and the result is a much fairer decision making process for the population at large.

All of this detail on the symptoms of the Northern Ireland "disease" and discussion about it should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the fundamental purpose of the Agreement is to create the unique framework and structure - the permanent ~~inter~~ governmental conference table - to deal with the disease itself - the deep divisions among our people which are the source of all the violence and injustices of which we complain. That is what has been recognised by the entire International democratic community as every single country in the Western World has expressed its strong support and encouragement for what they clearly see as a very significant development in an age old problem. Are they all out of step?