

A NEW ERA FOR IRELAND OPENS AT LAST

BY JOHN HUME

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With the announcement of a cessation of military activities by the Irish Republican Army and the commitment of their political voice, Sinn Fein, to peaceful and democratic means to reach an agreement between the people of Ireland that can earn the allegiance of all our traditions, we are now at the beginning of a new era in Ireland.

That was the clearly stated objective of my dialogue with Gerry Adams. Since five British governments and 20,000 troops failed to stop the violence, I took the view that if the killing of human beings on our streets could be ended by direct dialogue, then it was my duty to do so. I am naturally pleased that we have achieved this first major step toward lasting stability.

Now we must move on to our next major challenge: to reach agreement on how we share our piece of earth together. The challenge is to find common ground between two fundamentally different mind-sets - the unionist and the nationalist.

The unionist mind-set based largely in the Protestant population of Northern Ireland is akin to that of the Afrikaner who believes that, surrounded by hostility that is real or apparent, the only way to protect his people is to concentrate power in their own hands to the exclusion of all others. That approach is not only doomed to encourage widespread discrimination and conflict but is unsustainable.

Nor does it do justice to the unionist tradition. The unionists of Northern Ireland are justly proud of their heritage and their contribution to the world. As many as 11 American presidents came of their stock. They number captains of industry and colonial governors among their great men. They see themselves as a pragmatic, hardheaded, straight-talking, sceptical, robust people and there is much in their history to justify their view.

But the negative impact of their laager mentality has tended to dry up their political creativity and paralyse their political talents. The time has come for them to believe in themselves as their own best guarantors in a future shared with the rest of the people of Ireland. They must realize that because of their geography and their numbers, the problem cannot be solved without them. Their true interest depends precisely on the exercise of their traditional gifts of self-confidence and self-reliance. Let them exercise those gifts now by engaging in the political process of dialogue and consensus building.

The nationalist mind-set has traditionally relied less on the discipline of its people and more on its commitment to the territory of Ireland. "This is our land and you unionists are a minority and you cannot stop us taking it over" can fairly well sum it. But Irish nationalism has grown in its complexity, and it accepts that unity is not a territorial objective but one that involves people. It is people who have rights and not territory. A divided people can only be brought together by agreement. Agreement not aggression that bridges divisions. Agreement threatens no-one.

In my whole approach to this process, I have been strongly inspired by both my European experience and my contact with the United States. The European Union is the greatest testament to the resolution of conflict. After one of the bloodiest conflicts in history, which left 35 million dead across our continent a mere 50 years ago. Europeans are engaged in a level of co-operation so intense that it has blurred the traditional bounds of sovereignty and notions of territorial integrity.

The political system of the United States commands the loyalty of citizens despite the diversity of their ethnic make-up and experiences. Each US citizen carries in the small change in his or her pocket the maxim that holds the country together: e pluribus unum, from many we are one.

We are engaged in a process that seeks to give reality to this most profound truth. We must create by agreement, as was done in postwar Europe, institutions that respect our diversity but allow us also to work our substantial economic ground together - and by spilling our sweat and not our blood to begin our healing process. If that happens, a new Ireland will evolve, and the model that emerges may be very different from the models of the past. It will be based on agreement which is achievable and viable only if it can earn and enjoy the allegiance of all traditions.

Unionists and nationalists can only give their allegiance to a dispensation which is legitimate according to their respective traditions. Therefore the means of validating any agreement emerging from talks involving both governments and all parties must recognise and recruit the legitimacy of each tradition. We cannot embrace or express the equal validity of each tradition if we do not allow for dual validation of a new agreed political dispensation. The SDLP's proposal for a dual referendum would meet this requirement in a way that diminishes no tradition or any assurances it has or needs.

While we work for political agreement, we should also work together to build our country economically, concentrating on areas of higher unemployment in the North so that the positive results of the peace process can be visible to young people. We must give them hope and belief in the constitutional process. We must plan to give them the opportunity to earn a living in the land of their birth and to contribute to its development.

We have our work cut out for us and no-one should discount any of the difficult issues we must face. However, my confident hope is that the fast approaching 21st century will be the first in our island history in which the evil genius of mistrust and violence will finally be laid to rest.