

AGREEMENT THREATENS NO-ONE

BY JOHN HUME

What is very necessary at this crucial and important time in our history is that there is clear confidence in all sections of our community and that there is no concern in any section of our community that their basic heritage or interests are threatened. That is why in every statement issued by Gerry Adams and myself we made clear that our ultimate objective was agreement among our divided people on this island, an agreement that must earn the allegiance and agreement of all traditions. That to me is common sense and self evident because victories are not solutions in divided societies. There is a lot in our past that all sides continually complain of and indeed in many ways Northern Ireland politics has always been about the past. The time has come to draw a line over that past and let history judge it and let us look to a future for the first time in which we can reach an agreement that respects our diversity.

The Unionist people must leave their past attitude behind them. Holding all power in their own hands and excluding everyone else leads to widespread discrimination and ultimately to conflict. Given their laager mentality and their distrust of virtually everyone other than themselves all that I am asking them to do is trust themselves as because of their geography and their numbers the problem cannot be resolved without them.

Nationalists must leave their past behind them too and their traditional territorial mentality eg " this is our land". We have to recognise that it is people that have rights not territory and when people are divided then they can only be brought together by agreement. All resources must therefore be devoted to reaching such agreement as both Governments have promised and legislating for its outcome.

In my whole approach to this process I have been strongly inspired by my European experience. I have often asked people to cast their minds back 50 years when 35 million people lay dead across our continent. Could anyone then have forecast that in 50 years time we would have a united Europe in which Germans would still be German and French would still be French. It is the greatest example of conflict resolution in the history of the world given the centuries of previous conflict as well. It is the duty of everyone, particularly in areas of conflict to study how it was done.

Put simplistically conflict everywhere is because people see difference as a threat. Difference is of the essence of humanity. There are not two human beings in the world who are the same. Difference whether of colour, nationality or creed is an accident of birth and should never be the source of hatred or conflict. The peoples of Europe learned that at a great price. They decided to express that philosophy by creating institutions which respected their diversity but allowed them to work their common ground together - economics. By spilling their sweat and not their blood the healing process began and the prejudice of centuries was gradually eroded. The evolutionary process took place leading to a new Europe whose unity is based on respect for diversity.

I believe that we must do the same in Ireland. We must create by agreement, institutions which respect our diversity but allow us also to work our very 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 traditional models of the past but it will be based on agreement and earn the allegiance of all our traditions.

In achieving that process I believe that the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation suggested by the Taoiseach in the Downing Street Declaration would have a major role to play. I would see it as having two basic objectives, although other parties may have theirs. The first objective would be to plan how we break down the barriers of prejudice and distrust that divide our people and take practical steps to do so and to reach the ultimate agreement. I have no doubt that that will take time but if it is taking place in an entirely peaceful atmosphere it will be easier to make progress.

Meanwhile we should also in conjunction with the Irish abroad particularly in the United States, work together to build our country economically particularly concentrating on areas of higher unemployment in the North so that the positive results of the peace process can be visible particularly to our young people who would be able to earn a living in the land of their birth. I am aware from my major contacts in the U S political and business community where people of Irish extraction are prominent in both, that they would be very keen to help us in such a way. Indeed they are already doing so through the International Fund for Ireland which has already created 20,000 jobs. As the European experience has shown, reconstruction goes hand in hand with reconciliation.

I would of course like the Unionist people to do the same thing. I would like them to create a Forum in which they would also address the question of how they wish to protect their heritage and break down the barriers of prejudice and distrust that divide us so that we can reach an agreement that will protect our diversity. Naturally they too could develop links with their powerful tradition in Canada and the United States to tackle our economic problems and indeed of both Forums worked together on that non-controversial front it could be a major part of the process of building trust.

I would also like both Forums to commit themselves, in the old Presbyterian traditions, to a Covenant of Honour which would protect the heritage of both our traditions in Ireland and release our considerable energies and talents into building a new island of which we could all be proud and in which we are all protected. Let us now face our primary challenge which is to create the institutions that will achieve just that.