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NEW IRELAND FORUM

Framework for Discussion of
Fundamental Problems

1. This set of fundamental questions does not pretend to be exhaustive. Others may be added. The present paper may nevertheless help to set the framework for the discussion of the basic and more difficult problems to be faced by the Forum.
2. The parties meeting in the New Ireland Forum are attempting together the task of devising structures and principles which would guarantee peace and stability in a New Ireland.
3. There are divergences or at least important differences of emphasis between these parties. There would be much less need for the Forum than there is if these did not exist. It would be a mistake to underestimate the serious difficulty each party will have to face if the Forum is to succeed not alone in overcoming present differences but in confronting the full complexity of the crisis.

Common Ground

4. There are at the same time substantial areas of agreement. These include the following:
 - Before there can be fundamental progress, it is necessary that the British Government undertake a major reassessment of its own position and of its historical role in failing to come to terms with the widespread abuse of power in

Northern Ireland since 1921 or to accommodate the nationalist position;

- Similarly, Irish nationalists need to conduct a major reassessment of their position and historical role and their failure to convince the unionist population and the British Government of the merits of the nationalist aspiration;
- Among the principal reasons why the structures of Northern Ireland do not work is the fact that they deny to the nationalist section of the community in Northern Ireland (i) an adequate involvement in decision-making and (ii) an adequate symbolic and administrative expression of their Irish identity and aspiration;
- It is necessary both to understand fully and adequately to accommodate the problems posed by loyalists in any new structures.

5. These four principles, which taken together are central to the crisis, provide a point of departure for the deliberations of the Forum. They each need to be examined in detail together with a series of related problems. It would seem that the best way to formulate these problems at this stage of the Forum's work may be in the form of questions.

6. The work of the Forum is neither academic nor abstract. It takes place against a background of deep division and threatening violence. The crisis which the Forum attempts to address involves intolerable human misery. It follows that the Forum must be prepared to consider all options, including those which have hitherto not been examined, once they meet the criteria of pragmatism, durability and justice.

7. It is accordingly suggested that the Forum should begin its consideration of the fundamental issues by posing to itself a practical but difficult question: "Why is it that the constitutional nationalist politicians have hitherto not succeeded in persuading Britain to reassess its own position adequately?"

8. Several reasons will spring immediately to the minds of nationalists, e.g. British reluctance, neglect, lack of interest or hostility. All of these factors have at various stages been significant. Nevertheless, the historic reality, reinforced by the present crisis, is that the problems posed by the loyalist section of the community have been and remain the major pretext for the inadequate responsiveness of the British attitude. Without seeking to justify this attitude, constitutional nationalists have to ask themselves two questions: (i) do we, for our part, understand the ethos of those in Northern Ireland who adamantly oppose nationalism in all its manifestations and (ii) how could we demonstrate with the maximum credibility (to the British and the unionists) that we are, with the support of our people, ready to face some of the more expensive or otherwise uncongenial adjustments that this would involve for the Irish Constitution and for the Irish State as at present structured and administered? For example, in the difficult area of Church-State relations as they would affect family law, education and the administration of the health services?

9. It is difficult to deny that constitutional nationalists on this island have by and large given inadequate attention to the first of these questions and consequently have made inadequate efforts to deal with the second. The Forum must face both.

The loyalist Ethos and the Nationalist Aspiration

10. It is not easy for either nationalists or loyalists to understand each other's position. Both would hold the view that the others have consistently behaved in a negative fashion.

The loyalist Ethos

11. It is not easy for nationalists to understand the loyalist ethos if for no other reason than that unionists have collectively behaved in a consistently negative fashion towards nationalists. They have failed to explain themselves positively. The difficult question for nationalists to determine is not "What do unionists seek to prevent by such behaviour?" but rather "What do they seek to protect?" We know what they seek to prevent: an Irish state in which they consider the Roman Catholic Church would have undue influence and in which in their view their culture would be threatened; a unitary Irish State; power sharing (equality of treatment) etc. In our efforts to answer the more important question, it is necessary for us to remind ourselves that, as human beings, loyalists have the same concerns, the same motivations, as nationalists. The difference lies only in their perception of their interests as a separate community and this in turn reflects their

particular historic experience and their communal values.

12. Unionists assert that their heritage and their identity are separate from ours and, by implication, irreconcilable with ours. In other words our nationalist aspiration is seen by them as being fundamentally threatening to their identity. The unionists have been determined to oppose a united Ireland in which they consider that their identity and set of values would be eclipsed.

13. The central struggle of the nationalist heritage has been for the survival and development of the nationalist identity. It continues to-day in Northern Ireland. This historic effort has also regularly defined itself negatively, not primarily vis-a-vis unionists but rather in opposition to British domination. Since the establishment of the Irish State nationalists have reacted with hostility to Northern Ireland as an entity in which they see nationalist values and identity counting for little. Unionists have, nevertheless, particularly because of the unstable situation of the two communities side by side in Northern Ireland, viewed nationalist self-assertion as being directed aggressively against themselves. This perception has been reinforced by the present campaign of violence in Northern Ireland.

14. There is a related fact that complicates this interaction of the two traditions, namely, that many Northern Protestants regard themselves as being in a particular sense British, the inheritors of a specific communal loyalty to the Crown. The

traditional nationalist opposition to British rule is thus seen by those Protestants as incompatible with the survival of their own Britishness.

15. Loyalism, as a self-proclaimed repository of Protestant values and experience in Ireland, claims to embody a particular set of moral and philosophical values epitomised by the notion of liberty of individual conscience. This is set against a Protestant view of the Roman Catholic tradition as being authoritarian and centralist and as valuing individual judgement at far less than is the case under the criteria that emerged from the Reformation.

16. The loyalists therefore claim that their heritage comprises elements of political loyalty to Britain and a system of philosophical and moral principles both of which are incompatible with their perception of the identity, heritage and aspiration of nationalist Ireland.

17. A difficult question faces the New Ireland Forum: can we redefine, for our own purposes and for the purposes of dialogue both with Britain and those of the loyalist tradition, the traditional concept of "Irishness"?

18. Can we redefine this notion so as to accommodate these concerns of the loyalist and Protestant heritage - its British element and its philosophical element - in a credible way? In other words can we conceive of institutions and guarantees in a New Ireland which would manifestly protect these elements and provide for their legitimate self-expression? /.....

The Nationalist Aspiration

19. The parties in the Forum ~~and~~ their supporters share the nationalist aspiration to Irish unity, to be achieved through the democratic process. It is clear that this implies both a common rejection of violence as a political instrument and a common commitment to a process of persuasion (persuasion of Britain and persuasion of loyalists). The answers to several other questions which the statement implies are not clear, however, and these questions must also be faced honestly and realistically by the Forum. These questions are:

20. What do we mean by Irish unity?

21. Have we measured the real cost to ourselves and to others of progress towards Irish unity - ideologically, symbolically, economically, politically, socially?

22. We understand Irish unity to imply agreement freely arrived at by the two traditions in Ireland: how could we demonstrate the fact that this does not imply a framework pre-determined by the nationalists alone which would be followed by a process of negotiation and agreement that would then have to be within that pre-determined framework?

23. How could we demonstrate that by **unity** we simply mean comprehensive agreement - freely arrived at on the structures of a New Ireland - no more, no less? In other words, how do we demonstrate that we have no particular pre-conceptions on our side in relation to any of the fundamental issues to be agreed other than that the agreed structures should meet the criteria of justice, realism and durability?

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24. Or to repeat a previous question, how could we demonstrate with the maximum credibility that we are, with the support of our people, ready to face some of the more expensive or otherwise uncongenial adjustments that this would involve for the Irish Constitution and the Irish State as at present structured and administered? For example, in the difficult area of Church-State relations as they affect family law, education and the administration of the health services?

Accommodation of the Loyalist Ethos and the Nationalist Aspiration

25. Unionists by and large consider themselves British and give loyalty to the British Crown; nationalists by and large consider themselves Irish and give allegiance to a united Ireland. Unionists by and large have wished to belong to a political entity which sustained a Protestant philosophy; nationalists by and large have wished to belong to a political entity that sustained Catholic values. Therefore, the fundamental question posed is: is there an Irishness, are there political structures which can accommodate both nationalist and unionist positions? If the answer is 'yes', are nationalists and unionists prepared to compromise their view of an ideal political framework so that both cultures, ethos and sets of values can be put on an equal footing?

British-Irish Relations and External Relations

26. What would be the implications for the relations with Britain of a New Ireland whose structures took account of the concerns outlined above?

9.

27. What would be the role of Britain in sustaining these structures?

28. What would be the implication for the relationship with the international world of such a New Ireland and what would be the role of the international world in sustaining the New Ireland?