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Mr Bloomfield

EXPRESSING THE IRISH IDENTITY

1. You asked me to reflect briefly on the problem of how the Irish identity of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland might be expressed in a way that would reduce disaffection and promote reconciliation.
2. I do not wish to get into the semantics of alienation so I will avoid that term. I think however it would be unwise to dismiss all talk of unease or disaffection as politicians or their outriders crying 'wolf'. When somebody like Bishop Cahal Daly expresses disquiet, given his track record on the espousal of democratic politics and the denunciation of violence, he deserves some attention.
3. The expression of the Irish identity suggests the reduction to sacramentals and external trappings of a problem of unease, exclusion and isolation which is much more fundamental, and which is unlikely to be allayed except by structural and political changes. The catholic psyche in Northern Ireland has been on a see-saw for the last 60 years - between the desire to participate in the fullest sense in the society of which they are a part and the desire to be reunited with the rest of Ireland. At times one element is in the ascendancy, at times the other and rather failure to secure a satisfying place in Northern Ireland tends to elevate re-unification as the more desirable goal. There is a great deal of ambiguity about this, but neither drive is ever totally suppressed, and Kee's The Green flag exemplifies the enduring nature of the Irish nationalist tradition and the danger of trying to cork the genie in that particular bottle.
4. I think too, it needs to be said that the problem in Northern Ireland is not accommodating catholics qua catholics, but catholics qua republicans. There is also a real sense in which Northern Catholics, if sufficiently provoked, will see themselves not as a minority but as a detached portion of a national majority. This is one element in Harold Jackson's Double Minority formulation and it is stronger in the West where catholics tend to be in the majority even within Northern Ireland. The repeated use of the term "the minority" can itself become an irritant as well as focussing all discussion in the community along one line of cleavage.
5. The struggle within the Catholic/Nationalist community is really one between gradualism and the big-bang, between constitutional politics and physical force. This replicates the development in modern Irish politics in the late 19/early 20th centuries and SDLP must begin to feel uncomfortably like the Redmond's Irish Party. The failure of the political system to deliver a 'solution' is now a cause of frustration and disaffection, and further rebuffs are likely even more to weaken SDLP and drive people towards Sein Fein.
6. This is particularly noticeable among young people, and even before the PR disaster of the Summit, in professional middle classes (c/f Fionnuala O'Connor's piece in the Irish Times a couple of weeks ago). I must say that I find a new hardness in these classes, and the urge towards a more strident expression of the Irish identity through renewed interest in the Irish language etc, is not entirely surprising.

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7. In my view, the greatest area of dissatisfaction revolves round policy on the administration of justice - the use of supergrasses, the extremely lengthy periods of remand (amounting almost to internment without trial) and the inefficiency of the police complaints system. All these apart from own goals like the Galvin case or the triumphalist glee of Unionist politicians at the success of stake-out or shoot-to-kill operations which cause grave concern in the catholic community.
8. I don't think that a spruced-up police complaints system is likely to work. In any case it would probably be based on a GB system which is under pressure from the miners' strike. The real concern is that over a period of 15 years, and despite large sums having been paid out in compensation as ex gratia payments, no policeman or soldier has been successfully prosecuted, or even in the perception of the community, disciplined for the improper use of force. I see no easy answer to this - I know of no court in Western Europe (or USA) which is likely to find against a member of the security forces acting in the enforcement of public order - and this remains a great dilemma for democracies.
9. The RUC are put in a very difficult position in having to police processions which are seen as punitive raids or provocative coat-trailing in catholic areas. I think these processions cause more trouble than they are worth (and certainly cost a great deal to police) and some way should be found to limit them to real traditional and ceremonial occasions, to determine routes so as to minimise provocation and the need for policing, and to avoid those which are clearly designed to provoke.
10. As in the past, most 'aggro' at this fairly superficial level, arises locally, through the activities and attitudes of local bodies. There is little point in the Unionists' The Way Forward talking about the need to recognise the legitimacy of the Irish identity while its local authority members are in a frenzy about flags at White Rock et al.
11. I am not sure that the repeal of the Flags and Emblems Act would do much, or would be worth the hassle. A re-statement of the right to fly anything which did not provoke a breach of the peace might be enough, and a sensible policy of enforcement. I wonder too whether to use the union flag to provoke a hostile response is not only totally disrespectful but also a potential breach of the peace.
12. The playing of games on Sundays, and the siting of Gaelic pitches seems to be another source of discord which could be tackled through some form of very restricted local option (say within ¼ mile) which would allow people to protect themselves against the nuisance of the intrusive and unruly exercise of other people's rights.
13. My main concession to the Irish identity would be to recognise a right to carry an Irish or a UK passport, or both.
14. The extension of the franchise in NI elections to 'I' voters would remove an irritant but would have no significance for the vast majority of young people. There could well be a qualifying period of residence eg 1-3 years.

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15. Any change in student grant should not make it more difficult to attend schools or universities in the Republic.
16. The Irish language is recognised in Schools, the Bun Scoil Gaelach is in operation, the BBC has begun to provide for the Irish Language and there will shortly be an Irish programme for schools. I don't think there is much more that can be done. The Arts Council sponsors a Traditional Arts programme and a Community Arts programme on minimal budgets (about £100,000 each). These could be easily increased and would help to bring Irish cultural activities more into the mainstream of cultural life.
17. I wonder if the full impact of the ACE scheme has been realised. Apart from capital grants from DENI, the ACE scheme is funding 200 workers for GAA clubs this year at a cost of about £800,000.
18. It would be helpful if DENI were able to lend more support to local museums and to local historical societies (a remarkably ecumenical range of activities). A few hundred thousand pounds put into these activities would do a lot to cultivate a sense of place and belonging. There is also an Ulster place names archive in Queens, the work of the late Deirdre Flanagan, which it would be helpful to publish. I think too that if people in an area wish to supplement the "official" street names with their own Irish versions, this should be allowed.
19. Unemployment and inactivity will continue to be exacerbating problems. My concern is that the trends in EC and particularly the UK towards consistently high levels of unemployment for the skilled mobile few and marginalisation of the unskilled and long-term unemployed, superimposed on our present divisions may well exaggerate the gap between the relatively rich (and largely Protestant) middle class and a catholic lumpen proletariat.
20. It is important too that efforts in the direction of equal opportunities should not be negated by a narrow security screening policy (eg recent examples of trainees in NIES) which depend on guilt by association or in classifying whole areas as unsafe or their population as undependable.
21. I am afraid I have no great solutions, principally because this is an area of essential triviality?. What people need is to be able to belong, to be accepted on their own terms. Can we get a Minister to attend a Feis or a GAA game (perhaps at a University) without fanfare, but just as an ordinary routine thing? It would be even better if local politicians started to do so, but this is unlikely.
22. I believe that what the present generation of Catholics wants is a seat at the top table in Northern Ireland of whatever shape, size or location, and failing that, they will be increasingly willing to kick the furniture over. Even given that, they will require the right to 'aspire' (but not too hard) to a United Ireland and to express their 'Irishness'. The nearest we got to squaring this circle was at Sunningdale. I am not sanguine about any greater success in the years ahead. I do think that the hope extinguished at the Chequers Summit has been temporarily deferred until the next summit. If constitutional politics are perceived as having failed again the prospect for the SDLP must fall and those of SF/IRA rise.


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