

FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM AND  
COMMON INTERESTS AND THEMES

AN ALLIANCE OPENING STATEMENT TO STRAND 2

July 1992

## FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM AND COMMON INTERESTS

This complex three-stranded process, in which we are all now engaged, has begun to develop a certain culture or tradition in its way of handling our common task. We start the strand with each participant giving an initial general presentation, which outlines our analysis, and indicates what we see as being the fundamental realities and principles which must be addressed. We then move on to examine these, and further proceed to address the requirements, and eventually the structural or institutional expressions, of any solution to our problems.

As we have agreed an agenda for this second strand under your chairmanship, Sir Ninian, I will follow our common emerging tradition and confine the opening presentation from Alliance to addressing the primary issues described in items six and seven of the agenda, that is, the **fundamental aspects of the problem**, and the **common interests and themes**.

## FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM

It is a great strength of these negotiations that we have all agreed to address the three sets of relationships which are at the heart of our divisions - the relationships within Northern Ireland, the relationships between Northern Ireland and the rest of the island, and the relationships between Britain and Ireland.

In the Alliance opening statement to Strand 1, we presented our Analysis of the Problem with reference to four principles which we hold to be fundamental to the understanding, and indeed the resolution, of the problems of the first set of relationships - those within Northern Ireland. The other Northern Ireland parties, and the British Government representatives are familiar with that paper and I will not reiterate all the arguments set forward in it, since it is already available. Strand 2 is of course about relationships between, as we say at home, Belfast and Dublin, but it is greatly influenced by how we view the matters addressed in Strand 1, and so, in particular for the Irish Government representatives to whom this paper is largely addressed, I will briefly summarize those four fundamental principles:

The first is, that the people of Northern Ireland, despite their obvious divisions, are a historic and coherent community, and have the right to determine their own future, and participate directly in their own governance. A regional government is necessary to provide a common focus of loyalty, and an opportunity to share in self-government.

Secondly, that this community, whatever its historical coherence, is characterised by differences, and our primary objective must be the protection and the valuing of minorities.

Thirdly, that as in every community, stability and prosperity require the achievement and maintenance of law and order, our recent history ensures that in Northern Ireland we must be **especially** attentive to the requirement that at every level those who take positions of responsibility and represent all strands in our community, must have, and must exercise, confidence in the law and in those who administer it.

And finally, that there is a contribution to be made, and a price to be paid for peace in our community, not only by those who live in Northern Ireland, but also by those who live outside of Northern Ireland, in the rest of the United Kingdom, in the Republic of Ireland, and indeed further afield.

As we enter Strand 2, we are to address the second set of relationships - those **between** Northern Ireland and the rest of the island - and in the agenda for this element of the negotiations there are also outlined four fundamental aspects of the problem. They are described in item 6 as "underlying realities, identity, allegiance, and constitutional" matters, and I should like to address myself to them.

#### UNDERLYING REALITIES, IDENTITY, ALLEGIANCE, AND CONSTITUTIONS

To speak of underlying realities is immediately to imply that what appears on the surface may indeed be superficial, and it is certainly my conviction that much of what passes for accepted knowledge, is simply illusion.

Gathered here in London, to discuss future relationships between the two parts of Ireland, our minds must turn, as did the minds of the authors of the New Ireland Forum Report when they reflected on the origins of the problem, to the events of the early 1920's.

It seems to me that there were at that time considerable illusions about the strength and nature of the attitudes of the pro-union people of the North. There was a notion that if the British Government were to stand aside northerners and southerners would soon be reconciled. The southern delegates at Downing Street in 1921 seemed readily to agree that Ulster should be given a free choice, but found it more difficult to answer Lloyd George's question as to what would happen if the northerners declined to cooperate. This is a position which is not hard to find in some circles to this day. Perhaps it was the strength of the assumption that the resistance of non-nationalists was a passing notion of no great depth or

strength, that explains why it was such a minor issue in the bitter debates in the Dail that followed the signing of the Treaty. I would cite as evidence of this, estimations that of the 338 printed pages which the report of the debate fills, only 9 are devoted to partition, and two-thirds of these contributed by deputies from Monaghan.

That this illusion still persists is suggested to me by the expectations amongst the authors of the Anglo-Irish Agreement that whilst there might be passing annoyance and protest, it would be only a matter of time until there was some form of acceptance. I must tell you that the reality is far from this. Even in my own party which, as I have previously said, was prepared to bear the heat of the day, to give it a chance, the past seven years has left the Agreement in its present form, no more attractive than ever.

It is my hope that the people at this table will not imagine that the problem in Ireland is the border. I believe that it was Professor J C Beckett who said "The real partition is not on the map, but in the minds of men." It is in the hearts and minds and relationships of the people that we must look for the **underlying realities**.

Whether or not the border is seen to be the origin of the problem, it is nevertheless the case that there may be those here who would subscribe to the notion of the nation-state. In the Irish context this idea is often further elaborated to propose that an Irish nation-state should be contiguous with our particular physical geography. That is to say that there is an Irish Nation, which should identify with an Irish State, whose boundary should conform with the island of Ireland. It is this idea which was espoused in the 1937 constitution and, of most importance to us in these discussions, the claim to territorial sovereignty contained in Articles 2 & 3 of that constitution.

There is a profound romantic appeal to the proposition of an independent island nation state, and indeed I may say from a psychological point of view, the simple attractive proposition of being at one with oneself on an island surrounded by water, has the deepest of reassuring maternal resonances. It takes all of us back to a time before we can remember, and points to why the feminine, and especially the maternal element has played such a vital role in Irish religious, political, cultural, mythological, and social life.

It has taken a woman, the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, to point out to us, in her inspiring inaugural speech, that the sense of **identity** which is Irishness is not particularly a matter of statehood. "The State," she said, "is not the only model of community with which Irish people can and do identify." Her expression of freedom, which for me broke the link between mere state allegiance and a sense of

Irishness, meant that her election could be a matter of joy in East Belfast as well as in Ballina.

The truth is that it is not possible to define what a nation is, except on the crudest and most primitive of racialist theories. Nationhood is for many people a precious and a deeply meaningful thing, but it is essentially a matter of the heart, and as such is not exclusivist. It cannot be defined as a state can, and it is corrupted, and sometimes positively dangerous, when we mix it with the politics of statehood.

Most states are not in any real sense national entities. Belgium isn't. Switzerland isn't. The United Kingdom isn't. And while the Basques, and the Bretons share common citizenship with other Spaniards and Frenchmen, they certainly do not regard themselves as being part of a Spanish nation or a French nation. Perhaps at this particular time when others too are trying to resolve deep bloody historic divisions, we do well to reflect on what has happened when that most rugged and persistent nation, the Jews, have sought to identify Jewish nationhood with a particular piece of ground, the state of Israel. To identify Irishness with **allegiance** to a particular state is to confuse, to alienate and to divide Irish men and women.

'But,' some of you will say, 'when our President spoke of the Irish diaspora, she was speaking of something different. The Irish emigres in North America, Australia, and even those in England, have chosen to leave home. They hold allegiance to their own state. They are Americans (albeit Irish-Americans), Australians, and some are even British, but to live on the island of Ireland is something quite different. Whatever about nationhood or identity, there is the question of statehood. It is surely clear that the boundary of the state should conform to the natural frontier provided by the sea.'

This is a misunderstanding of the history and social geography of Ireland. Communities are formed through communication between people. Through ties of kinship (which we do not choose, but into which we are born) we develop a sense of identity and often of nationhood. Through the politics of social and economic intercourse, and the need for mutual protection (which we do choose, and which may change) we develop states and the benefits of citizenship. This is all on the basis of communication.

In the past the water, if it was not too wide, was not necessarily a frontier. On the contrary it was a line of communication. It was easier and a good deal less dangerous to travel back and forth between the North-East of Ireland and the South-West of Scotland than to venture inland and across country to Galway or to Cork. That is why not only the Presbyterians of Antrim and Down, but also many of the

Catholics of the Glens of Antrim, are originally Scots, some of them of very ancient pre-reformation descent. The community in the North-East of the island, whose actual extent has varied considerably over the centuries, has always had a regional distinctiveness, and powerful relationships with both Scotland and with the rest of the island of Ireland.

The Welsh and the Scots do not depend for a justification of their nationhood, or the boundary of their territory on a spurious confusion of physical geography with social geography, and it does no justice to a sense of Irishness to make such a dangerous error. A sense of community, is not defined simply by the fact of sharing an island.

There are some whose attachment to the notion of an island nation state, is such that they will happily sacrifice not only relationships but lives to bring it about. I know that no-one here shares that view, but some of you may say in a wistful, and sad way, "What have we done wrong that Northerners do not want to be part of a unitary state."

Perhaps you are asking the wrong question. When a young woman asks herself, "Why does he not love me?" she will often respond to herself that she is not pretty enough, not clever enough, not wealthy enough, or perhaps not of the same social class, or religion. In general these are not the issues. He does not love her, because he does not love her. It is not something rational. It is a matter of the heart. The real question for the young woman is "Why are you so besotted with him, that despite the fact that he has eyes only for another, you make a nuisance of yourself about him?" (In these days of equal opportunity I must take care to point out that the gender identifications I have used are by way of example only.) But the question is important. You must ask yourselves why it is that you are so determined to take to yourselves people, who whilst quite happy to live beside you, and indeed be friends, do not want to sign a marriage contract. Indeed the more you press your attentions, the more your suit is likely to cause offence, and there is no more clear aspect of this than the threatened shot-gun marriage pre-figured in Articles 2 & 3 of the **Irish Constitution..** What is this desire that it cannot be satisfied with "the hand of friendship,..... and no strings attached?" if I may quote again from President Robinson.

It is hard for us to accept the realities of life, especially in matters of the heart, but it is now a fact of history that this is the position. The majority of the people of the North-East of the island do have a desire for good neighbourly relations, but if you see these talks, or if you see the evolution of European integration, as some kind of back door to a United Ireland, you are dreaming dreams which can make a real relationship difficult if not impossible.

## COMMON INTERESTS AND THEMES

If these are some of the underlying realities, the varying identities, the divergent allegiances, and the constitutional problems, what are the common interests and themes that bring us together?

We must not forget that there are already many social and cultural realms where cooperation throughout the island is considerable. The main christian denominations, many sporting, professional and trade organizations, and artistic and cultural bodies always have operated, throughout the island. There is an extensive network of trusting and solid cooperation on which to build the **social relationship** between North and South.

There is also a wealth of opportunity for us to learn more from each other in the economic field, and out of that to enjoy unprecedented growth and development. For years we have known that in **agriculture, tourism, energy, transport, the environment and economic development**, the opportunities for cooperation are very considerable, and the price that we have both paid for its absence, has been similarly considerable. That is not to say that working together is without its difficulties. We have only to recall the introduction of the 48 hour rule, to appreciate that. But it is clear that our small island economy, wholly inside the European Community, must address these issues if we are not to suffer quite unforgiveably in the future. We would like to explore the possibility of establishing a series of Joint North-South Commissions, for the express purpose of developing cooperation in these areas, because we believe that it is in both our interests.

If however we are truly to address the broader and more divisive questions of identity, allegiance, and the constitutions, the fraught and necessary responsibilities for law enforcement and security cooperation, and all those other matters which may not in any case fall to the responsibility of a new Northern Ireland Assembly, we should look towards the establishment of a **Tri-Partite Council** which, like these talks, brings together representatives of all three jurisdictions.

A series of new institutions in which governmental representatives, back-benchers, and officials from Belfast, London and Dublin would meet to explore important matters of mutual concern, such as the welfare of young emigrants, the transport network throughout the islands, environmental issues, drug trafficking and organized crime. We have also pointed out in the preliminary discussions for Strand 3 that the creation of a Human Rights framework for the islands would be a most useful issue for such a Tri-Partite structure. The present bilateral Anglo-Irish institutions should be changed

to accommodate the input of the people of Northern Ireland, and widened in their scope and activity. This would not be unprecedented for it was achieved for all the component parts of the Low Countries in the Benelux arrangements, and for the various Scandanavian states and their subsidiaries in the Nordic Council.

#### FINALLY

In Strand 1 we have already begun to face the very great difficulties which stand in the way of agreement, and in this opening statement I have tried not to shy away from the deep historical divide that we must cross if we are to build new relationships between the people of the two parts of the island. But I also want to make it clear that I am impatient with the begrudgers and Jeremiah's outside who are already prophecying doom. These people expect us to come here and say words to each other that have no meaning, and then to go away empty. In Alliance we have found that building relationships between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland has not been about changing each other, but appreciating each other. It has been hugely enriching, and we come here with the same expectation of enrichment in building a better relationship you.