

LECTURE DELIVERED TO THE IRISH ASSOCIATION IN DUBLIN ON 19 JANUARY 1988

by

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Yesterday was Martin Luther King Day, and almost a quarter of a century has passed since that August day in 1963 when King stood under the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and proclaimed his dream, that one day the red hills of Georgia would see the sons of former slaves and former slave owners sitting down together. Even now, every time I read those words I am moved by them as I am by no other speech I have ever known. Fired by non-conformist zeal and inspired by the non-violent protests of the Mahatma Gandhi, King forged a civil rights movement which changed the face of American life. Across the world others who had laboured under oppression and discrimination followed his lead and, in April 1968, Austin Currie lit the flame of non-violent protest in Ulster when he occupied a house in Caledon, Co Armagh, to protest at its allocation to a single secretary of a Unionist solicitor instead of a homeless Catholic family.

But in that same month Martin Luther King was assassinated, and by the Autumn the civil rights campaign in Ulster had exploded into violence. Twenty years later with the Enniskillen Massacre still brutally fresh in our minds a new

generation of Ulster men and women must ask themselves what has happened to the dream.

It seems to me that the essential vision of the non-violent protest was that violence however it is motivated, necessarily creates a reaction which is violent in nature. In many instances the reactionary violence is so powerful that it subdues or even wipes out the protester altogether. But even in those situations where it is successful and where an uprising is followed by a revolution the result is inevitably a settlement which reverses and often institutionalizes the violence which was previously experienced. For example the Jews having successfully liberated themselves from generations of anti-Semitic persecution and founded Israel, are now themselves recreating concentration camps, this time for Palestinians. The liberation of Zimbabwe from white oppression is fast followed by the intolerant indigenous domination of a one party state. Even here in Ireland the violent end to British Rule in the Southern Counties was followed by a bloody civil war whose bitter remnants still live on in some personal relationships and in the structures of political life here.

It seems to me therefore that not only the form of the protest, but also the form of the change which is desired, is important in determining the type of outcome. If a man sees what another man has and wants to take it from him, the inevitable result is a struggle for possession.

Let us take the example of the Falkland Islands. Until a short time ago few British people knew where the Falkland Islands were situated much less valued them. When the Argentinians attacked and captured the islands, the British people suddenly began to believe, that if these islands were so desirable to someone else, they must after all be worth something, and in any case not only the islands but some remaining British pride had been lost. This was enough to justify the expenditure of hundreds of millions of pounds and the lives of many young people on both sides. We might put it this way: "As soon as I see what he has, and desire it and wish to take it from him I will increase his desire for it and will create or exacerbate a conflict where a conflict may well be in neither of our interests."

The usual approach to violence of this kind is to institutionalize it. We create an adversarial legal process, which functions on the presumption that one man is guilty and the other innocent; that I am telling the truth and the other is a liar. We bring up our children in an educational scheme in which each is encouraged to compete with and outdo the rest, and to be satisfied only when he has left the failures far behind. We create wealth and poverty in an economic system where competition is the life of trade, and where shipyard workers in Belfast become embittered against shipyard workers on Tyneside, who rejoice when they take an order away from the shipyard workers in Glasgow, all of whom are outdone by shipyard workers in the Far East who live on the meanest of wages, and this to the benefit of shipowners, who buy their ships more cheaply. We devise political systems where the man or woman who gets one more vote at the polls or the party which gets one more seat in the house,

can ensure that his supporters have the whip hand in decision-making, and all others must wait in the wings for another day, to have their time.

Whilst this type of control can put a lease on physical violence, it maintains the adversarial nature of conflict and it can, over time, lead to a level of polarization which leaves the community vulnerable to just that kind of violence which it hopes to prevent. This sort of eventuality can be seen in Britain today where the post-war consensus has broken down, and the policy of increasingly untrammelled competition is leading to a dangerous community divide. The political map after the last election shows a great swathe of blue across the south and east of the country while the rest of the map is flecked with red and yellow. That same south and east is powerful, near to government, and is experiencing economic growth almost to the point of overheat. At the same time the people of Scotland, the Regions and Northern Ireland are largely unrepresented in the highest levels of decision-making, and with a worsening level of chronic unemployment and economic decline, and a feeling of alienation from the structures of government, there is evidence of an increase in crime, dissension and other indicators of social malaise, such as marital breakdown and the abuse of alcohol and drugs.

Increasingly there has been a realization amongst liberal thinkers that the freedom of the individual to achieve his potential is dependent upon his relationships with others. In economics this has led to the embracing of the cooperative movement, the suggestion that there could be an election of some workers on to company boards, and ideas of profit sharing being linked to pay

settlements. In education there is now good evidence of the value for all children of an increasing emphasis on working together rather than solely in competition with one's peers, and while a case can be made for some types of specialization, the argument for integration of boys and girls, and different religious and cultural groups from the same community is, objectively speaking, almost unanswerable. There is also I believe the beginnings of a realization that the constitutional and legal system of which the British have been proud, with justification, for so long, is now becoming inadequate to the needs of a population which demands more of democracy and the law, and which sees the people of other nations governing themselves more equitably. The pressure particularly for proportional representation in all elections is growing.

The key to the quantum leap which will be necessary to take us into the next stage in the development of democracy is the realization that adversarial systems which make a judgement in favour of one element in the system are constructive only in a fairly primitive sense. The lesson of the dialectical process is that progress consists not in making decisions for or against a particular thesis, but in the harmonious synthesis of opposites. There are few who would challenge the proposition that Northern Ireland provides the clearest of opportunities to work with apparently irreconcilable opposites, but for the last two decades that is the coal-face of political progress to which the Alliance Party has committed itself.

For all the differences there are between the two halves of the community the sharing of a common suffering at the hands of fellow Ulstermen is devastatingly apparent to the on-looker. From the inside of course, my violence is reactive and justifiable, whilst the other's is an utterly reprehensible and unprovoked violence. But when the murders at McGurke's Bar are mirrored by the Poppy Day Massacre, a little of the awful futility of it all begins to dawn. It is of no use to keep a tally of broken-hearted mothers and orphaned children. To know that you have brought more grief to your brother than he has brought to you is a sorry reassurance.

It is out of this community suffering and a conviction of the truth of Henry Grattan's observation that the freedom of one is impossible while the other is in chains, that I put forward proposals for political progress in Northern Ireland.

In the first place I believe that there is within Northern Ireland one divided community, not two or three or more communities. The interchange of people between Ulster and Scotland, is no more recent than the to and fro movement between Ulster and the rest of Ireland. History, culture, language, names, physical attributes, religion, dress, humour and even drink not only separate us but also bind us together in ways that we often fail to recognise. This view of a common Ulster Identity has begun to gain a measure of credibility because of the publications of some Ulster historians, and has been taken up in radio, journals and drama. The danger is that like the Irish identity, this Ulster identity could be hijacked by one group as its property, and a

potentially unifying force can become a point of further nationalistic division. The clearest and most positive political expression of such an identity amongst the people of the North would be a local Assembly, with a shared control of local affairs at every level. In a community where real political involvement and responsibility has been denied for too long, there is a thirst amongst young people in both parts of the community for an opportunity to fill the political gap. Many young people in the middle ranks of both nationalist and unionist parties are desperately keen to grasp hold of the responsibility for running their community. They feel resentful that older politicians who have never had to take responsibility for running Northern Ireland, are making progress towards devolution difficult, but these younger politicians are not yet powerful enough to ring in the changes. A devolved Assembly elected by proportional representation, and itself establishing by the same method a form of partnership administration, would provide the nursery slopes for a new generation of politicians to find their feet in a new form of government. The fact is that since the publication of the Commonsense Document and the Task Force Report, it is clear that there are people right across the political spectrum who now see this type of constitution as worthy of support.

The great fear and concern in both communities is that such a working together requires a level of trust which is lacking. This can only be created by the building of relationships through common experiences, but already there has been agreement across the community that the inclusion of a Bill of Rights enforceable through the courts would provide a form of protection and dependable restraint.

While such a procedure would give protection to individuals, a political right of appeal could be established to give minorities the option of turning, for arbitration, to the sovereign parliament, should a majority decide to set consensus to the side in any unjustifiable way.

Finally in recognition that no resolution can be possible which fails to take into account the relevant interests of Britain and the Republic of Ireland, an interparliamentary conference with representatives from Westminster, the Dail, and the Northern Ireland Assembly would meet on a regular basis to discuss matters of common interest.

This recognition of the positive contribution which Britain and the Republic of Ireland could play should not blind us to the realization that both can play a negative role in the process of resolution. Particular political stances, insensitive statements, failures to demonstrate successful cooperation on security, and perhaps more than any one other thing the maintenance in the Republic's Constitution of the territorial claim to the North, are highly damaging to the delicate process upon which we are embarked. Myths and romance have their place, but when you insist on perpetuating a myth which is contributing to the suffering of your nearest neighbours, surely it is time to replace it with an honest aspiration to unity. I welcome the fact that the Progressive Democrats have in the past week announced just such a proposal as part of their new draft for the constitution. I believe that were it to be accepted by all parties and acted upon, this measure would bring, not



immediately, but none the less certainly, it would bring, a new type of relationship with the people of the North.

Britain too has its part to play, for many of the changes which I am proposing are far in advance of what is yet widely acceptable amongst politicians in the Labour and Conservative parties, in respect of Britain itself. They must be prepared to accept that if they balk at the prospect of changes such as Parliamentary Devolution or the Bill of Rights because of the implications for the rest of the United Kingdom, then the blood of many innocent people will cry out at the injustice. It is not enough for those of you fortunate enough to be living outside to upbraid Ulstermen for not being progressive enough to find ways of living together, if you happily remain yourselves in antedeluvian splendour and thus contribute to the strife.

Though I truly believe that these proposals have much to commend them, it would be inconsistent, in the light of what I have already said, to regard them as a final word. Much more important than any set of proposals in such a climate is the process of consultation and negotiation which occurs. It was the failure to recognize this fact that made the Anglo-Irish Agreement so problematic. That there is, and that there will continue to be an Anglo-Irish Agreement, is not only obvious, but obvious to the vast majority of thinking unionist people. The question is whether the mistakes of 1985 can be repaired. I believe that they can, and that the review procedure alluded to in the Agreement provides the opportunity for everyone involved to get off any hooks upon which they may have impaled themselves. But again, the kind of review

procedure which would best serve the interests of all the participants, should be a part of the process of negotiation, and a discussion of this matter could begin at any time.

Dreams can often refer as much to the past as to the future. The dream of a united Ireland speaks of a mythical romantic past where all was one and at peace. The dream of the unionist is to return to a protestant province for protestant people. The one thing the Anglo-Irish Agreement does make clear is that the past is over. There can be no returning to the past for any of us. For us there must be a vision of the future. A vision which the whole Northern community can share. A vision of a family that finds its way towards being together. A vision of a time when the tools of violence are put to the side. A time when Ken Magennis, and Alban McGuinness and Dan McGuinness, and even, if he too can put his gun down, even Martin McGuinness can sit down at the table of brotherhood. And not only the Magennis family but all the divided people of Ulster can way of sharing that bit of ground in peace.