

NORTHERN IRELAND - COMMUNITY, IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY

There has been a significant debate about identities and the nature of the Northern Ireland problem at this conference. This paper is an Alliance contribution and response to that debate.

We welcome discussion on these broad themes. They are familiar to us. There were many such discussions in the immediate pre-Alliance and early Alliance days. We have always found such discussions helpful in increasing mutual comprehension, reducing misperceptions and identifying common ground, if all meet with an earnest desire to understand the other, rather than to persuade the other.

COMMUNITY, IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY

An improved understanding of the community will facilitate the substantive work of this conference in devising institutions acceptable to all. However we are mindful of the reality that we are four different political parties, each with our own philosophy, goals and priorities. Clearly we experienced the problem of Northern Ireland differently. If we did not, there would not be a problem. The important task before us is not to agree an analysis, but to agree institutions which are capable of meeting our basic needs and of satisfying, in some measure, our differing aspirations and ideals.

AN ALLIANCE PAPER

Northern Ireland is often described as a divided community. Our analysis begins with the community, not with the divisions. Northern Ireland has a distinct history going back into the mists of Irish mythology, and has variously been, the last stronghold of Gaelic Ireland, a hotbed of radical and revolutionary thought, and a centre for confident industrialism. It has been a distinct political entity for seventy years, and the horrors of the last quarter of a century or so, have served to underline the sense of Northern Ireland's distinct, if not unique, national identity.

8 May 1992

Its people come from many starting places, but they share in large part a common culture. Most of them practice, or at least pay lip service to, the Christian faith in some form, something which they share with large parts of the rest of the world. They speak a common language, and partake of a broader culture based on that language which they share with the rest of the English-speaking world. They are not distinguished by racial or physical characteristics. They live in much the same sort of way, share similar values and enjoy much the same things. They are one community, having been in essence that which divided them, living in what has been called a place apart, but sharing a great deal with the rest of this island, the rest of these islands, and the rest of the developed world.

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An improved understanding of each other can facilitate the substantive work of this conference in devising institutions acceptable to all. However we are mindful of the reality that we are four different political parties, each with our own perceptions, analyses, policies and priorities. Clearly we understand the problem of Northern Ireland differently. If we did not, there would not be a problem. The important task before us is not to agree an analysis, but to agree institutions which are capable of meeting our basic needs and of satisfying, in some measure, our differing aspirations and ideals.

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It is none the less self-evident that Northern Ireland is a bitterly divided society. There is little point in rehashing the history of how we came to be in this position, suffice to say that we recognize that the prominence of the constitutional question has tended to polarize the community into two broad political positions. They are conveniently characterised as unionism and nationalism, and a large number of people in Northern Ireland identify, to some extent at least, with one or other of these positions, or with aspects of them. These positions are commonly seen as irreconcilable, and mutually exclusive. We have used the term 'political positions' here, but there are also significant overlaps with religious distinctions, and to some extent with some cultural features. Some people use the term identity to sum up these combinations of factors. We tend to see identity as an individual matter, and prefer to use the term tradition, as one that better indicates the historical context in which these groupings have their origins. It also expresses the variety of viewpoints which can be subsumed within what we would refer to as the unionist and nationalist traditions.

We recognize that these traditions are broad and complex, and contain within them significant variations of perspectives. The nationalist tradition for example contains a long-standing division between constitutional nationalism and physical-force republicanism, while another section of what can for the present purpose be termed nationalism looks primarily to justice and fair play within Northern Ireland, rather than to an all-Ireland solution. There are important differences within unionism, not least between integrationists and devolutionists, the former placing particular emphasis on a London-based solution, the latter on a Belfast-based solution.

We would also see these traditions as being developing things, as being capable of change, and even in the nature of things, as being bound to change.

In acknowledging these two principal historical traditions, Alliance would also identify and place itself within what we have often called the third tradition. That, broadly speaking, is the liberal and democratic tradition, which does not base itself on land and nationality, but on freedom, plurality and internationalism. Its adherents have sometimes allied themselves with one, and sometimes with the other of the two principal traditions, and sometimes with neither. It stems from the great European liberal and democratic tradition which is seeing its fulfilment in the coming together of the people of Europe. In the context of Northern Ireland it includes those who, whether in politics, culture, religion, or in private life have refused to be categorized as Orange or Green.

That tradition is by its very nature broad and diverse. Its primary value is respect for individuality and for individual conscience. It stands for democracy, values minorities and distrusts the authoritarian tendencies of the big battalions. It welcomes diversity in society, sees that all societies are diverse and recognises a source of strength and richness in that variety.

In the context of Northern Ireland our tradition, seeks to find ways in which the essential unity and diversity of our society can be reflected in agreed institutions, so that all sections of our society can play their full part in decision-making within Northern Ireland. We acknowledge the legitimacy of the two main historical traditions, and we recognize that there is much in each that we can admire and embrace. We hope that they may be prepared to recognize us and that we can all address and resolve the problem of our relationships here in Northern Ireland, and in later stages address too the other important sets of relationships which play their part in the problem.