

A Question of Identities?

A Statement by the Ulster Unionist Party

1 Unionists do not feel confused as to their identity. We believe that Britishness allows for great diversity within the nation, and that the United Kingdom is strengthened by the variation of views and background of many of our citizens. We resent any effort to put us into an "identity-pigeonhole".

2 The SDLP's Paper entitled "Agreeing the Nature of the Problem" attempts to illustrate that the main problem facing the Government and the people of Ulster is one of "Identity". We would challenge this assertion, and would maintain that identities are far more subtle and complex, and have far less impact on the political life of a country than the SDLP believe. Political institutions and systems cannot in themselves cater for perceptions of identity by any sector of the population.

3 First of all, identities come at different levels and different angles of cleavage in any community. They may be derived from locality, whether that be town, county, region or country, or from ethnic origin, religion, class or culture. Obviously several of these can interact, and in certain circumstances a person identifies with one group in, say, a religious sense, and with another in cultural matters.

4 Looking specifically at "national" identities, there are those who support, with a wide range of strengths, the concept of the Union or, if one prefers, a British political milieu. Some see themselves as simply "British" without any qualification, others as Irish-British, Ulster-British and even now, European-British (or perhaps British-European!). And there are those who think of themselves as simply "Irish" but nevertheless prefer to live in a pluralist British society, as exists in all parts of the United Kingdom.

5 In considering the identities, or rather range of identity, which might be distinguished under the religious heading, it is quite impossible to generalise. The population cannot simply be split between Protestant and Roman Catholic, there are sub-divisions, other denominations and indeed increasingly people who cannot in conscience claim any faith. And within that range, there are some Protestants who support an anti-partitionist political line, just as there are many Roman Catholics who, openly or covertly, support the Union and embrace a British national identity.

6 The SDLP's paper bases its assumptions on the Report of the New Ireland Forum. In the Report, Chap. 5, Paras. 8 & 9, the nationalist identity is described in positive terms while the unionist identity is treated in a negative fashion. If nationalist and unionist are to be regarded with equal respect, then Para. 9 should read:

The Unionist identity and ethos comprise a sense of British identity and a democratically founded wish to have that identity institutionalised within the sovereign United Kingdom.

7 The negative attitude to Unionism contained in the Forum Report is reflected in the Anglo Irish Accord. "Unionist" is equated with "Protestant" and those who regard themselves as Unionist are described in negative terms as feeling under threat from things Irish/Catholic. This negative attitude belies the determination of all Unionists, of whatever religion or in whatever part of the United Kingdom, to maintain the Union and continue as subjects of the Crown and citizens of the sovereign Kingdom of Great Britain & Northern Ireland.

8 The SDLP's paper states the vision and aspiration of the nationalist community to be:
...the creation of a new and tolerant society that unites and accommodates all traditions in a new Ireland, where Nationalists and Unionists can co-exist in harmony and mutual respect.

If a new Ireland involves Northern Ireland being taken out of the United Kingdom, then the Unionist identity has indeed been subsumed!

9 A Unionist may rejoice in things Irish, as a Scot in things Scottish, but he is essentially British and wishes to remain so. The fallacy of equating Unionist and Protestant has given rise to the spurious promise that he can be respected and accommodated in an all-Irish Republic. Patently a Protestant could be, but a Unionist, never!

10 It is fatally flawed to regard a Unionist's allegiance to the Sovereign as that of a Protestant to a Protestant monarchy. A sense of being British transcends such limited loyalty: his allegiance is to the whole concept of government and freedom of the citizen which has evolved and created a respect for all minority cultures living peaceably within the Kingdom.

11 In a truly pluralist society different identities and cultures can and do co-exist. Discord only arises when these identities or cultures become aligned with different political policies and only when there is no other way of resolving such policy differences will conflict ensue.

12 While we appreciate that the Nationalist perception of identity differs from our own, we are concerned to understand that perception. Nothing will do more to remove the barriers raised in the community by these differences in perceptions than the formation of workable democratic structures with which all can identify.