

Paths to a Political Settlement in Ireland: Realities and Principles**Preamble**

The coming of peace provides an historic opportunity for a new beginning in Northern Ireland, in the island as a whole and in relations between the peoples of Ireland and Britain. It has already transformed the daily lives of people in Northern Ireland; opened up the possibility of a lasting political settlement, negotiated on a basis of parity of esteem and inclusiveness, and promises the hope that conflict and a security-dominated way of life can be replaced with co-operative structures and new relationships. But peace has also brought anxiety and uncertainty - about its permanence and about the price of compromise. Healing the pain and grief of those who have suffered, overcoming the legacies of the past, building trust and reconciliation, and establishing a durable political settlement and a fair and inclusive society represent formidable challenges that must urgently be addressed.

The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation is part of this process. It believes that a common understanding of the problems we face, followed by agreement on the principles which should underlie their resolution, are essential pre-requisites of any durable political settlement; only then can specific political structures and models be established. Each party to the Forum has presented policy statements on this approach - subsequently published under the title "Paths to a Political Settlement in Ireland" - debated and examined them in detail in the Forum and explored whether, arising from these statements and debates, an agreed position between the parties was possible. This document represents the outcome of that process. The document therefore sets out (a) the key realities which require to be addressed and (b) the principles which should characterise a political settlement acceptable to all. As such, it represents the shared view of those participating in the Forum only. The main parties of the unionist/loyalist tradition are not represented at the Forum and therefore had no direct input into the document's preparation. That said, the document was drafted in a spirit of reconciliation and compromise, with every effort being made to take account of unionist perspectives, as the Forum understood them.

The Forum recognises that there is no commonly accepted analysis, historical or otherwise, of the roots of division and mistrust. Each tradition has its own perspective on history, in common with its own aspirations for the future. The minimal treatment in the document of the historical origins and causes of the conflict reflects the extreme sensitivity of this issue. The Forum's view - buttressed by recent international experience - is that an agreed version of the historical dimension of the conflict may not be possible in the short-term (indeed that a focus now on that dimension could paralyse dialogue) and that movement towards an overall settlement may have to proceed without it. To limit the treatment of the historical dimension is, of course, problematic in terms of a comprehensive analysis of the realities which need to be addressed - and some would argue unfair and impractical. Nonetheless, the view of the Forum is that the primary focus now must be on the present and the future and on the need for an accommodation acceptable to all - something which the past has failed to provide.

It is readily acknowledged that the document is incomplete without direct unionist input. Nonetheless, as the considered view of the many parties participating in the Forum, it constitutes, we hope, a positive step towards the construction of an analysis that represents existing realities fairly and suggests acceptable principles for a solution. It is proposed as a next step that the document be sent to the unionist/loyalist parties for their consideration and in the hope that, whether within or without the context of the Forum itself, it could represent a basis for taking forward the overall dialogue process.

Present Realities

Arising from its discussions on the nature of the problem, the Forum has identified the following key realities as, in its view, requiring to be addressed:

- (a) The most urgent and important challenge facing the people of Ireland, North and South, and the British and Irish Governments together, is to remove the causes of conflict, to overcome the legacy of history and to heal the divisions which have resulted.
- (b) The coming of peace provides an unprecedentedly favourable climate in which to face this challenge. The opportunity now available needs to be grasped to the full.
- (c) Divisions within Northern Ireland and within the island are part of the historic legacy of wider British-Irish relations. The origins and context of those divisions, therefore, transcend Northern Ireland itself and their resolution will require a new beginning in the totality of relationships involved - ie. those within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands.
- (d) In terms of the way ahead, a central role rests with the Irish and British Governments. Building on the close and constructive partnership that has been developing in recent decades - starting with the Sunningdale Agreement, put on a formal footing in 1980 and leading over time to the deepened level of co-operation represented by the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Joint Declaration and the Joint Framework Document - the two Governments must lead the process of overcoming the divisions of the past, and the search for a new accommodation acceptable to all. Both Governments have acknowledged this responsibility. The British Government, having declared that it has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, has accepted that its role will be to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of agreement through a process of dialogue and co-operation and that it will legislate for any such agreement, while the Irish Government has committed itself to the principle that there will be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the freely-given consent of the people of Northern Ireland.
- (e) The engagement of the political parties in Northern Ireland in a process of inclusive dialogue will also be crucial to the achievement of a comprehensive accommodation.
- (f) Conflict and division now in Northern Ireland primarily result from profound disagreement on its constitutional status and on how and by whom it is to be governed. This fundamental absence of consensus underlies many other divisions, including on policing, the administration of justice and a range of economic issues. There is however a more open acknowledgement than in the past of the depth and complexity of divisions that exist.
- (g) Violence, from whatever source and whatever its rationale, served - particularly in Northern Ireland, but also as between North and South - to deepen divisions, reinforce the barriers of fear and hatred, retard cross-community contact and reconciliation, and impede the search for agreement. It caused immense human suffering. The costs in

economic terms have also been on an enormous scale.

- (h) By the same token, the ceasefires announced in Autumn 1994 and the corresponding reduction in the scale and intensity of security arrangements, have profoundly altered the situation in Northern Ireland and represent a strongly positive contribution to the process of establishing an agreed settlement. The bringing about of the ceasefires was made possible by the efforts of many: the climate created by the commitment of the two Governments to a common approach on the core issues, the work of many individuals and groups within the republican and wider nationalist communities and within the loyalist and wider unionist communities, and the support and influence of the US Administration and the European Union. There is a deep determination throughout Ireland, North and South, that peace must be maintained and consolidated.
- (i) The profound disagreement on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland derives from the fact that the two major traditions define their identities, allegiances and aspirations in terms which transcend Northern Ireland, viz looking broadly to Britain and Ireland. The Joint Declaration acknowledges that there can be no stability under a system rejected on grounds of identity by a significant minority.
- (j) The divisions between the two communities in Northern Ireland, and between the two traditions on the island as a whole, have been perpetuated and accentuated by an absence, to a large extent, of mutual understanding, of contact and of dialogue between them. This absence of trust represents a major obstacle to the negotiation in good faith of an overall political settlement.
- (k) Each of the two major traditions has the critical mass to prevent the imposition upon it by the other of a political settlement to which it is opposed. The corollary is that only through an even-handed and just compromise, achieved without violence or coercion and acceptable to both communities and to both traditions on the island, can a lasting and stable settlement be reached. While the accommodation of the two major traditions remains the primary requirement, such a settlement must also take account of the minority of people, particularly in Northern Ireland, who define themselves as neither unionist or nationalist in any traditional sense (the "third strand").
- (l) The issues of self-determination and consent are critical. There is disagreement about how the principle of self-determination should be applied. The evolution - and on a shared basis - which has taken place in the positions of the two Governments in this regard is of central importance. The British Government recognise that it is for the people of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right to self-determination on the basis of consent freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland if that is their wish; the Irish Government accept that the democratic right of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. This integrated approach by the two Governments to the issues of self-determination and consent has been accepted by the majority - though not all - of the political parties, North

and South, representing a large majority of the people of Ireland as a whole.

- (m) At present, a majority of people in Northern Ireland wish for no change in its current constitutional status. Conversely, a substantial minority of its people wish for a sovereign united Ireland. It is recognised that the option of a sovereign united Ireland, which is also the preferred option of a majority of the people of Ireland, does not command the consent of the unionist tradition, nor does the existing status of Northern Ireland, which is the preferred option a majority of its people, command the consent of the nationalist tradition. Against this background, there is a need for new arrangements and structures which, on the basis of a new and balanced constitutional accommodation, will reflect the reality of diverse aspirations, reconcile as fully as possible the rights of both traditions, promote co-operation between them, and afford each, on the basis of equality of treatment, secure and satisfactory expression and protection in all spheres, including the political, administrative, symbolic, economic and cultural, and that of policing and the administration of justice. In the context of such a balanced approach, and reflecting the identities and wider relationships involved, these arrangements will need to include North/South and strengthened East/West structures.
- (n) The existence of severe deprivation within both communities in Northern Ireland, and of persistent socio-economic inequalities between them, quite apart from their intrinsic unacceptability, represent a barrier to the search for a lasting and comprehensive political settlement. The coming of peace will undoubtedly be of substantial economic benefit to Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland as a whole. The Forum's own study of the social and economic consequences of peace and economic reconstruction suggests that the "peace dividend" will be substantially greater in the context of a political settlement than in that of simple continuation of the ceasefires. Ensuring that the economic benefits of peace are fully realised, and that they promote social inclusion, is essential.
- (o) In North/South terms, the numerous common economic interests, the convergence between the structures of the two economies and the increasing inter-action in the context of peace between the business communities in both parts, in other economic spheres and indeed across a broad range of human activity, bear testimony in practical terms to the need for joint or common approaches.
- (p) Major economic, social and cultural changes have taken place in the South over recent decades. These have led to the creation of a more prosperous, diverse and pluralistic society, very different from that which existed in 1969. One consequence of this is a significant shift in attitude among many towards Northern Ireland and towards Northern unionists. This has led to a greater openness to examine with the latter any element of the democratic life of the South that is seen as a threat to them.
- (q) The development of European integration also requires new approaches between the two parts of the island to serve their economic interests. Participation in the process of European integration has been a significant ingredient in Ireland's recent political and economic development. While the effects of membership have not been felt to the same extent in Northern Ireland, the European Union's supportive response to the ceasefires

has served to highlight the positive potential of the European dimension. Already, co-operation on social and economic issues in the EU context has helped to bring people together across the divide in Northern Ireland. Common involvement in the European Union has injected new and constructive elements into relations between Ireland and Britain. European integration holds enormous potential for an accommodation in Ireland, both as a model for the resolution of deep-seated conflicts and as an incentive for a more co-operative approach to the many shared economic and social problems confronting the two parts of the island.