

## **YOUR ENEMY IS FRIGHTENED - AND SO ARE YOU**

Dr John Alderdice

This last week has seen the most promising political development in twenty-five years of violence and communal strife in Northern Ireland. The announcement by the Provisional IRA of a 'complete cessation of military operations', opens the door for Irish Republicans to move away from terrorism into democratic politics, and seems likely, after a time, to result in a ceasefire from Loyalist terrorists. Whilst some had begun to despair of any end to the Irish 'Troubles', other onlookers, wonder why it has taken so long to achieve a ceasefire, and are bemused at the cool reception it has received in the Unionist community which has suffered so much from the PIRA violence. Some elucidation may come from a study of the anxiety which affects each section of the Northern Ireland community.

It is not always understood that whether a new situation is threatening or presents new opportunities it will create uncertainty, and anxiety. As the fear rises, people draw back into their traditional protective postures. In a divided community, each side looks at the other, and sees a threatening enemy. Nationalists identify unionists with historic Britain, and perceive them as determined to recreate the domination of the past. Unionists hear talk of a 'peace process' as merely the latest manifestation of a long war whose purpose is to drive them out of Ireland, or subsume and dominate them in an all-Ireland republic. Each can cite good evidence for their views, but this obscures another reality which is just as important.

### **NATIONALISTS ARE FRIGHTENED**

Nationalists harbour a very deep fear of unionists. They see them as aggressive, defiant, and always on the side of the dominating authority. When they see unionist intransigence, and worse still experience the attacks of loyalist paramilitaries, they do not understand the fear that generates it, but are merely confirmed in their belief that unionists can never be trusted to be fair. They are nonetheless sure that if nationalists were in control they would be fair.

A fear which unionists find even more difficult to understand is the nationalist fear of being betrayed by the rest of the island. While unionists see Articles 2 & 3 of the constitution of the Republic of Ireland, as an illegal, irredentist claim of jurisdiction, many nationalists feel in their bones that these articles actually represent the point, in 1937, at which the rest of the island accepted partition. To lose those articles would be to allow southern nationalists to let go of the North without a conscience.

Fear makes nationalists turn to stratagems and outside support which will deprive the unionists of power, and will tie the Republic of Ireland to them. This increases unionist fears and confirms the unionist view of manipulative and untrustworthy nationalists. The result is unionist anger and aggression, and the murderous behaviour of loyalists, which nationalists fear most.

### **UNIONISTS ARE FRIGHTENED**

Unionists harbour a very deep fear of nationalists. They see them as manipulative, and always on the side of those who want to undermine the authorities. When they find little acknowledgement of the many reforms in the administration of Northern Ireland over the last twenty-five years, hear

explanations being given for the violence, and worst of all, when they have experienced the attacks of the PIRA for twenty-five years, they do not understand the fear that generates it, but are merely confirmed in their belief that nationalists can never be trusted to be fair. They are also most offended by suggestions that unionist unfairness is not justified.

Unlike unionists, nationalists do understand the anxiety of unionists about British betrayal, but, despite their own deep anxieties about the Republic of Ireland, they find it hard to understand why unionists prefer to trust to perfidious Albion rather than throw their lot in with their nationalist neighbours.

Fear makes unionists turn to defensiveness and to outside or unconstitutional support which will protect them against being overwhelmed by nationalists. This confirms the nationalist view of stubborn domineering unionists, and leads to the stratagems and murderous republican violence which the unionists fear most.

In short, the behaviour of unionists and nationalists, especially in times of uncertainty and fear, tends to bring about the very situations, which each fears most. The violence and clinging dependence which each side demonstrates, also alienates both Britain and the Republic of Ireland, fulfilling again the fears of betrayal. Such uncertainty is caused by any prospect of change, even change for the better.

#### ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

Whilst the talks during 1993 between John Hume, the moderate Nationalist leader, and Gerry Adams who leads the extreme Republican movement, gave nationalists great hope of an end to violence, it fuelled loyalist fears, and made violence from that side much worse. Nationalists simply did not understand that verbal reassurances to unionists to "trust Gerry Adams and John Hume, when they say that no-one has anything to fear", are perceived by the other as a very bad joke.

The transient sense of confidence that affected some unionists when the British Prime Minister, John Major and the moderate Unionist leader, James Molyneaux reached an 'understanding' at Westminster, seemed to nationalists like the beginning of a return to the bad old days. Unionists simply couldn't understand how improving the procedures at Westminster and the re-establishment of the Conservative and Unionist axis should be seen as a threat. After all, if John Hume had both the Irish Republic and the United States of America in his pocket, why should unionists be denied this one friend in the world? In fact nationalists saw the initial failure of the British and Irish Governments, especially the Dublin Government, to accept the Hume/Adams proposals with open arms, as leaving them without a friend who really understood their dilemma. They could not understand the Irish Prime Minister, Mr Reynolds when he quite correctly observed that no solution could come about which emanated from only one side of the community.

How was this anxiety to be reduced so that each might stop doing things which make the situation worse, and produce what each feared most? Words of reassurance, which say that no-one has anything to fear are of little use. They are not believed, because in fact each side does have something to fear. The only solution lies in the creation of a context that does not in reality threaten one more than the other.

Only the British and Irish Governments could do this. The two Prime Ministers set about creating the context for real progress. That is why the Downing Street Declaration which they signed in December 1993 is so critically important.

## WHAT PROBLEMS FOR THE MAJOR/REYNOLDS INITIATIVE?

The outline of a settlement is clear. There must be a fairly autonomous, responsibility-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly, with strong protections for minorities. There must also be institutionalized North-South relations, and a reciprocal change in Articles 2 & 3 of the Republic of Ireland's constitution. All this must be established in a more democratized Anglo-Irish context. So, what problems do the two Prime Ministers face as they try to achieve the settlement?

First, each will continually be tempted to address the interests and concerns of those with whom they are closest. It is critical that Mr Reynolds shows by what he does, more than by what he says, that he is sensitive to the concerns of unionists as well as nationalists. It is crucial that Mr Major, by what he does, as well as by what he says, shows sensitivity to the concerns of nationalists as well as unionists.

Secondly, they should not be surprised to find considerable resistance to their efforts, and not just from the expected quarters, and combinations. In human relationships there is always resistance to change, even change for the better, and the two Prime Ministers will need both steady nerves, and gritty determination to see it through. They will also need to be able to risk disappointing some of their friends in the short-term, as well as surprising their opponents.

Finally it is the relationship between the two of them which will be the healing factor, and so they must do all possible to maintain it. When parents fall out it is the children who suffer - and Northern Ireland has already suffered more than enough.

Of course there is more to the Northern Ireland community than just fear. There is a common humanity, and a solid goodness in the heart of the people that has kept them from descending into complete chaos. After some of the appalling atrocities which both sides have inflicted on each other, especially in recent years, the people know how it feels to look into the abyss. That is why, despite the superficial reactions of the moment, there is a deep desire not to fall back from what promises to be, the brink of peace.

Dr John Alderdice is Leader of the non-sectarian Alliance Party, the only political party in Northern Ireland that has significant support from both sides of the divide. A medical doctor, he also works as a Consultant Psychotherapist, and a Lecturer in Psychotherapy at The Queen's University of Belfast, with a special interest in the political psychology of divided societies.