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BLOCKING THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

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**Why Unionism
should go for a
North-South Institution
with limited functions
and executive powers**

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The Directors of the Banford Press are interested, inter alia, in encouraging the development of a self-confident and a civic unionism which will in turn enable it to reach an historic accommodation with Irish nationalism, the other great political culture which exists in the island of Ireland. With that objective in mind they will be glad to receive and consider papers and articles of a similar length with a view to publication.



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is a paper read by David S. Cook on 10th February, 1997, to a meeting of the South Belfast Association of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. Mr. Cook's views, as set out in the paper, are not necessarily the views of that Association or of any other body with which he is associated.

THE BARNFORD PRESS

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BLOCKING THE SUPPLY SLOPE

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BLOCKING THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

*(Why Unionism should
go for a North-South Institution
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ACCOMMODATION, NOT JOINT AUTHORITY

The political forces, both national and international, at work in Irish affairs at the end of the 20th Century point all of us in Northern Ireland, and by all of us I mean Unionists and Nationalists, in the direction of a political accommodation between Unionism and Nationalism. I would much prefer to achieve the accommodation which I describe in greater detail later in this paper, or something like it, rather than see the creation of joint authority over Northern Ireland by the Governments in London and Dublin. In this paper I assert that such an accommodation can be found; that it should be found; and I give an indication of how it might be found.

It can be done because, as we approach the end of the century, most nationalists and, I would argue, probably, most republicans in Ireland, North and South, have come to the view, with obviously varying degrees of reluctance, that, subject to certain conditions, partition is going to have to be lived with. The debate and negotiation which has to take place is about the conditions relating to human, social, cultural, religious and political rights under which that can happen.

For their part unionists should take the opportunity of encouraging rather than discouraging the acceptance of partition by nationalists.

It should be done because an accommodation between unionism and nationalism is infinitely preferable to either joint authority or repartition. In addition to this I estimate that the British political establishment is increasingly fed up with the brand of selfish sectarian unionism which is pretty well all that has been on display for two or three generations. I use the phrase British political establishment to distinguish intelligent and discerning elements in all parties at Westminster and in Whitehall from this particular Tory Government for whom, for at least a year and probably eighteen months, parliamentary survival has been the name of the game. When the dogs on the street start making jokes about the possibility of Unionist M.P.s voting against the Government in a vote of

possibility of Unionist M.P.s voting against the Government in a vote of No Confidence because they can't get a parking ticket fixed, things have reached a pretty pass. I am not so naive as to suppose that the Government is ashamed of that situation but that does not alter the fact that it should be.

FUNDAMENTAL MORAL OBLIGATION

Before describing the accommodation between Unionism and Nationalism which can be achieved, we should analyse why it is that unionist leaders and unionism in general have got things wrong so far.

The fundamental starting point of my argument needs to be stated clearly. In spite of the claims of some unionists that partition and a Northern Ireland Parliament was not what they wanted, the political reality is that unionism won in 1920. Northern Ireland remained within the union. But about half a million nationalists also remained within Northern Ireland. Unionism had a moral obligation then, and at the end of the century it still does, to find ways in which northern nationalists can feel at home in a Northern Ireland which remains within the union. Unionism has never discharged that moral obligation. Some would say that it has never intended to. The question which remains is whether it intends to now.

HABITUAL MEAN-SPIRITEDNESS

Unionist spokesmen and leaders are their own worst enemies. They have never understood that to be unionist, you do not have to be anti-nationalist. They have always adopted the old style Fianna Fail line, now very largely a thing of the past in the Republic of Ireland, that to be Irish you can only be catholic and nationalist - but in reverse. Too often too many unionists have said that to be Unionist and British you cannot favour, or support, or even nod in the direction of anything nationalist or, in some cases, anything Irish or, in the worst cases, anything Catholic. Any such move has been seen as a concession which must automatically result, as if by magic, in a United Ireland. They have never understood that the best and ultimately the only way to secure the Union is in fact to reach a graceful accommodation with nationalism.

The habitual sectarian mean-spiritedness of so many Unionist spokesmen and representatives has always been unnecessary and counterproductive, and it is obvious nonsense but unfortunately it has more serious consequences than nonsense. It has lead unionism down the road of negativism and failure. How often have you heard unionists saying that their so called plight is all the fault of the media especially the BBC? How often have you heard unionist commentators complaining

say there is a conspiracy against them? Only recently we heard that the personnel in the Unionist Information Office in London have been getting frustrated because they say no-one listens to them. Talking of the unionist message in their mid - December 1996 full page advertisement for cash and supporters in the Newsletter they said:

“It is a simple message, but some how it is not getting across”.

Their problem is that the message is at best inadequate, sometimes even pathetic and at worst wrong. Too often we hear of Machiavellian schemes by the British Government to get rid of Northern Ireland. While it should be obvious to any student of politics that there have been many people over the last twenty-five years in the British political establishment, and there may still be, who would like to get rid of Northern Ireland, it must by now be equally obvious that they have not been able to. I can not be the only person who has heard it put in almost exactly those terms on a number of occasions, invariably under Chatham House Rules, but nor can I be the only person who is anxious about what effect the antics of some Unionists, whether of the last couple of years or of the last couple of generations, is having in Whitehall and Westminster. If many of us think we have been feeling the pinch economically in recent years, I suspect that we ain't seen nothing yet. David Owen as usual put it very bluntly some years ago. “You have a perfect right” he said “to be as intransigent as you like but don't expect us to pay for it”.

THE REAL WORLD

On 26th April 1996, Mr Gusty Spence was quoted in the Irish News as saying:-

“The people within the Unionist Party and within the Unionist population have to recognise that the old order of things has gone. The days of touching the forelock and the days of subservience are gone and they had better get used to it. The predominance has gone and the ascendancy has gone. The working class never had it so it doesn't affect us. Its left to those people to enter the real world as we have”.

The awful truth for “those people”, the sections of unionism to which Mr Spence was referring, is that they have consistently failed, and failed abysmally, to make the proper and clear distinction between the entirely honourable political position of wishing Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom (a position which, I might make it clear at the outset, I share and support) and the entirely dishonourable political position of indulging in a sectarian anti-nationalism which includes being anti-catholics and anti-things catholic; and also includes being

being anti-catholics and anti-things catholic; and also includes being anti-Irish, and, more conventionally, anti-nationalist.

Some unionists, usually liberal unionists, will claim that they are expressly anti-nationalist and not anti-catholic. Many observers will allow that there is undoubtedly a section of unionism, or at least some unionists, who are acutely uncomfortable about demonstrations against catholics going to mass at Harryville and indeed who are in fact opposed to such demonstrations. Thank goodness that that is so. We would be even worse off than we are if there were not any unionists who oppose that behaviour. But that is not the point; and nor is it the point that there are Catholics who are not Nationalists.

The real point which needs to be made clearly is that most catholics in Northern Ireland (precise percentages in each case are unimportant) either practice their religion or do not wish to see those who do denigrated and abused; most catholics in Northern Ireland either take part in or support a range of Irish cultural activities involving music, dancing or the language or do not wish to see those who do take part in or support them denigrated or abused; and most catholics in Northern Ireland either describe themselves positively as Nationalists, in that they actually aspire to or hope that one day there may be a United Ireland, or even if they do not describe themselves as such, they do not wish to see those who do denigrated or abused.

Unionists, even liberal unionists, do not have the right to define their catholic fellow citizens in the way that unionists want to define them. Only catholics are entitled to define or limit their own cultural and political identity. For cultural unionists the problem does not really exist. For them all catholics are seen simply as nationalists or even republicans although that it obviously not so. But liberal unionists should stop wasting their time trying to explain that they can be nice to catholics but not to nationalists.

In the real world we inhabit in Northern Ireland, you cannot separate the cultural and the religious and the political. Being anti-nationalist includes in practice being anti-catholic and vice versa. Unionists are quick to point out to not very intelligent republicans, that protestants would not be very happy in a United Ireland even if the protestant religion were to be protected because protecting the protestant religion and its practice is only half the battle - the other half is the fact that they are British and that they want to be part of the United Kingdom. Those Unionists are right to point out that that distinction has no value. In the same way liberal unionists should not be surprised if most catholics tell them to stuff the distinction they make between Catholicism and Nationalism.

SECTARIAN ARROGANCE

The anti-nationalism I am describing therefore covers being anti the broad ethnic spectrum involving the religion, the culture, and the politics of many, perhaps most people in that group and it can take a number of forms. It is not simply the expressly religious anti-catholicism with which we are familiar ranging from "all catholics are going to hell"; to throwing bibles and abuse at visiting clerical dignitaries; to insulting protestants who marry Catholics; to throwing abuse and stones at those going to mass at Harryville. It extends to the childish insults directed to things such as Irish dancing and the Irish language. It extends to the almost continuous whingeing about the Fair Employment legislation. It regards anyone who has the temerity to ask whether there is any good policing reason why the Union Jack should be flown on Police Stations on the 12th of July as virtually beyond redemption.

A further and a good example of the perceived sectarian arrogance of, in particular, the Orange section of unionism has again come to the fore recently in the debate about the North Report on Parades and Marches. I know, and I have known for many years, Orangemen for whom, personally, the various public manifestations of orangeism are indeed manifestations of a much loved culture which is important to them; which they are entitled to preserve; which they do not intend to be offensive; and which they do not wish to stuff down my throat or anyone else's. They know that I am a Protestant who does not think, indeed is quite certain, that Protestantism, and I use the word in both the religious and cultural sense, does not need to be defended by the usual public manifestations of Orangeism.

But recently we have yet again been faced with unionist and Orange spokesmen who have asserted that the public manifestations of orangeism are no more than the inoffensive display of a carnival and festival spirit or, alternatively, involve no more than Orangemen wanting to walk to or from their place of worship.

Those spokesmen have consistently and deliberately failed to acknowledge that some Orangemen (and I use the word "some" because I do not mean "all") go to some parades or marches (and I again do not mean "all") for the purpose, amongst other things, (and I stress that this may not be their only purpose) of offending or antagonising some people. The message of some Orangemen some of the time has always been and continues to be "croppies lie down". It is the intention of some of them some of the time to stuff their music, flags and drums down the throats of some people from communities other than the Orange community. And on some occasions this may well include other Protestants quite as well as Catholics, Nationalists and Republicans.

The consistent and deliberate failure of those spokesmen to acknowledge that this is one of the purposes of some Orangemen some of the time, and their continued assertion that there is no other reason for Orangemen to walk down, for instance, the Garvaghy Road than to go to and from Church to the sound of hymn tunes, amounts to a lie told by one community to another. The problem which Unionist and Orange spokesmen have to face is that very few people outside their community believe their lie. Very few people outside their community believe that the partial re-routing of, may be, a dozen or twenty parades out of over three thousand parades per annum amounts to any sort of an attack, let alone a serious attack, on Unionism or Orangeism. Very few people outside their own community give any credence to the suggestion that this amounts to an attack on civil and religious liberty.

Indeed, many people outside their community in fact think that the actual amount of re-routing involved would improve and increase the amount of civil and religious liberty available in Northern Ireland. Many people outside the Orange community actually think that the interests of Orangemen would be better served by a new honesty and a generosity of spirit.

Recently (Letters, Irish News 8.1.1997) I came across another good example of this arrogance from a prolific unionist correspondent. He referred to "the Nationalist community who consistently showed little or no gratitude for anything that the Stormont regime provided for them over the so-called fifty years of Unionist "misrule". "Surely" he asked the Editor "you could for once find something to give them credit for". He then has the temerity, crassness, and arrogance to refer to education and educational qualifications, as if this was in some way a generous free gift from Unionism to Nationalism. Why did he not refer to hospitals, social services, roads, and support and assistance for economic development and agriculture, and a hundred and one other government services? But I wonder if that correspondent has ever paused to contemplate the sheer crassness of his comments. If the Unionist regime at Stormont had failed to provide education for Catholics it would obviously not have lasted even for as long as it did. Has he ever considered what it was that the Stormont regime was not providing for nationalists when it was ultimately abolished in 1972, and why it was abolished?

PREDOMINANT MORAL ISSUE

Such crassness is not limited to the outer fringes of unionism. The Cadogan Group ("Square Circles" page 12) talking about the differences between the Middle East and South Africa on the one hand and Northern Ireland on the other, assert that unlike in the case of the first two there is not, in the Northern Ireland situation, "a clear, predominant, moral

issue". I find it almost inconceivable that this could appear in print in 1996 even from the pens of so-called liberal unionists. I think the clear predominant moral issue can be put very succinctly and it is as follows:-

"If, at the end of the 20th Century, the partition of Ireland, first embarked on in 1920, is to be confirmed, how can the descendents of Irish Nationalists, who found themselves on the wrong side of the Border then, and for whom nothing was done to make them feel at home between 1921 and 1972, be made to feel at home in Northern Ireland now, and how can it be done generously and gracefully so as to put an end, once and for all, to violence in Irish politics?"

DEEP DIVISIONS

Another symptom of the anti-nationalism which I have described, and sometimes simply of political lethargy, is to deny that the divisions in this society are deep, or even that there are any divisions at all. Those unionists who tend to play down or even deny the existence of those divisions are hooked on the idea that assimilation is possible. They seem to suggest that if you treat Catholics nicely in Northern Ireland, they will become good little unionists. Unionism needs to grapple with the news that assimilation is dead. There is no more chance of nationalists becoming good little unionists than there is of unionists becoming good little nationalists. This section of unionism seems to suggest that we might, may be, just possibly, look at some sort of watered down power sharing in Northern Ireland but no way could we even think about a North/South Institution because if you give them an inch where will we be then? Yes, you have got it in one - on the slippery slope to a United Ireland!

Civic unionists and civic unionism should have none of this nonsense, but more important, we should make it clear that none of it is necessary. We should make it clear that there is not going to be a thirty-two county unitary state (that is to say a United Ireland) in anything like the near future, or possibly at all, because there are not anything like enough people either in Northern Ireland or in the Republic who want that to happen. I will look later in this paper at what the chances might be of that position changing and how we ought to handle the situation if it did; but in the first instance civic unionists must declare anti-nationalism, as I have described it, unnecessary, counterproductive, anti-social, and wrong.

HISTORIC COMPROMISE

My thesis is that many, but clearly as yet not all, republicans and nationalists are in the process of reaching towards an historic compromise in which they can be persuaded to accept, or will acquiesce in, the

partition of Ireland. The job of unionism, at the end of the 20th Century, must be to stop denying the existence and aspirations of nationalists and to start finding ways, and to identify the circumstances, in which nationalists north of the border in Ireland can come to terms with partition. Civic unionism denies that that cannot be achieved. It denies that there are only squares and circles which cannot be fitted together. It denies that if you are not a friend you are an enemy. It ultimately denies that there is no common ground to be found between unionism and nationalism.

More and more people are frustrated and fed up with the general proposition which seems to be put by timorous unionist commentators and politicians that if you make any so-called concessions on anything, you are on the slippery slope to a United Ireland. Unionism, if it is to have any chance of creating a society which most people in Northern Ireland actually look forward to living in, must first acknowledge the deep divisions which do exist; secondly, that those divisions are between Unionism and Nationalism; and thirdly, that a radical accommodation, is required between Unionism and Nationalism. To go on denying, as did Mr Trimble in his speech to his most recent party conference (October 1996), that no compromise is possible between Unionism and Nationalism is, at the end of the twentieth century, grossly inadequate.

But unionists should go further, perhaps paradoxically, but nevertheless obviously, in their own interests. Nationalists aspire to a united Ireland. That aspiration may vary in strength. Some nationalists might be very positive about it. Others may merely hope that one day it might conceivably be possible. But it is that aspiration which marks out nationalists. That aspiration is legitimate. A civil and a civic unionism should set out to find ways in which to accommodate that aspiration.

SLIPPERY SLOPE

But unionists who are anxious about where it may all lead, and whose classic cry is either that we are already or, if we make the simplest concession, we shall be on the slippery slope to a United Ireland, are entitled while they hold a majority in Northern Ireland to block that slippery slope. Indeed there should be no slopes at all, let alone slippery ones. The ground should be level and there should be no pot-holes or hidden traps. To use more precise constitutional legal language, and if I have been critical of the Cadogan Group earlier, I hope I may quote them with approbation on this issue, "Any relationship between North and South must be based on the constitutional, political and institutional integrity of the two separate jurisdictions on the Island of Ireland". Before I describe how to secure that integrity and the possible levelling of the slope, it may be helpful to look at the theory and practice of consent.

CONSENT

Some Unionist commentators either reject or conveniently forget about what remains one of John Major's important insights about the political process in Northern Ireland. Although the idea did not originate with him, he catapulted it into public policy. It is that what ever accommodation is ultimately reached should be put to a referendum in Northern Ireland. This is what ultimately guarantees the consent of the people. It would be contemporaneous with a referendum in the South (which would be necessary for the purpose of dealing with Articles 2 and 3). Thus, separately in each jurisdiction, but contemporaneously, the people of Ireland would have spoken on the new arrangements which would, if adopted, have the consent of majorities in each jurisdiction.

This was quite properly welcomed at the time of the announcement but it did not take long for unionist commentators to start a process of denigrating the idea. "Forget the South" they said. "We are not interested in what they think", they said. "In fact Articles 2 and 3 never did matter", they said. "What matters is the consent of people in the North alone" they said. They had suddenly realised, after nearly sixty years of going on about De Valera, his 1937 Constitution, and Articles 2 and 3 (and in my view quite properly going on about them because he, it and they were bad articles!), that they could not be seen to support the process of separate but contemporaneous referenda, because of course those referenda would be the result of and would follow a process of negotiation, of compromise, and of accommodation, and it is precisely that accommodation which is to be consented to in the referendum.

So the question we have to address is, does each citizen get to agree to each and every different issue in the accommodation before there can be any accommodation at all and thus before consent can be freely given? The answer must be no. It is utterly impossible to expect that no accommodation can be reached until all parties and sub-parties and sub sub parties right down to individual citizens can freely give their consent to it and this for two different reasons; one is that, since, the opportunity which has arisen, is of an historic compromise between Unionism and Nationalism, it is, I think unconscionable that each political party or grouping should have a veto. This is a matter which has been addressed in the Mitchel Talks which require the consent at each stage of parties and interests representing a majority in each community.

And the second reason is that being born into any society or polity at any time or place, now or in history, has resulted in individual human beings having to make compromises with other individual human beings which, to some extent reduce or alter the theoretically absolute, but generally useless, freedom which is only known to an individual who

finds him or herself alone on a desert island. Real adult life, like marriage, or any genuine partnership, is a series of compromises. Compromise and accommodation is the stuff of life. When Mr Trimble says that compromise between unionism and nationalism is not possible, he is wrong and he has clearly not yet entered the real world.

UNITING IRELAND BY MAGIC

The reason why most, although as yet obviously not all republicans have given up violence is not because they have experienced a Pauline conversion to virtue, sweetness and light. It is because their activities over a period of twenty-five years have produced a situation in the Republic in which virtually no-one (that is to say no-one except Republican Sinn Fein) now hardly thinks in terms of, let alone advocates, a united Ireland or, as it is otherwise defined, a thirty-two county unitary state. Indeed the recent (January 1997) reference by the IRA to a United Ireland was a reminder of how relatively infrequently it has been referred to even in Northern Ireland. You will have noticed what sounded almost like the relief of some unionists who latched on to that statement. Indeed, some people may wonder whether some unionists and some republicans would not in fact find it easier to settle back into the old routine. We are constantly reminded of how much easier it is to make war than it is to make peace.

It is almost as if some people need the comfort of the old war cries to sustain them in what Sir James Molyneaux perhaps correctly, from his point of view, identified as the deeply and disturbingly destabilising process of making peace. Some of those war cries are well known. "We have given too much", "Thus far and no further"; "The Government is weak", "We have made concession after concession". All these need to be examined because it is my contention that unionism as such has not voluntarily given one single thing, or in fact made one single concession to nationalism as such, not simply since direct rule was introduced in 1972, but not ever since 1922.

Now there is little point in raking over the coals of the old Stormont. That institution was abolished because unionism could not find, and made no attempt to find, any accommodation with nationalism. I was both amused and appalled to read about the recently released Government papers for 1966 (which, it is worth recalling, was some years before anyone had heard of the Provisional IRA). They contain a memorandum from the then Attorney General to his cabinet colleagues. It was in response to a Northern Ireland Labour Party and a Northern Committee of I.C.T.U. memorandum which raised with the Government issues

relating to the unfairness of the local Government franchise and electoral boundaries, and discrimination in housing, employment, and patronage. The Attorney General's response was to warn his cabinet colleagues against making any concessions which could result in the North's "destruction as a political entity".

The Attorney General seems to have thought that if, apparently, any gesture or concession was made on those sorts of issues, it must result in a United Ireland and he was obviously going to have nothing to do with it. Perhaps he thought the Unionist Cabinet was like a magician waving a magic wand. Perhaps he thought that if the cabinet, say, in January 1966 decided to introduce on 1st September of that year, say, a fair system of local government franchise (which was in fact done without the sky falling in a few years later) then hey presto and abracadabra there would be, come 1st September 1966, as if by magic, a united Ireland.

We know of course that this did not happen! Perhaps his reaction and what he actually did, did not in fact involve any thinking at all. Maybe we don't need any knowledge of politics to analyse the thinking and behaviour of some unionist leaders either then or later. Someone had already told us how a unionist Cabinet would react between 1921 and 1972 in response to entirely reasonable proposals from nationalists, and people who were not even nationalists. Just like dogs wagging their tails, they would simply claim that any concession would destroy Northern Ireland as a political entity, exactly as Pavlov had predicted.

RECKLESS INTRANSIGENCE

I have already indicated that Stormont was abolished essentially because the leaders of unionism failed even to attempt to find any accommodation with nationalists. And I am not the only commentator who has claimed that the only serious threat to Northern Ireland as a political entity has come from the arrogance, the antics, and the sectarian behaviour of some unionists. Since direct rule unionism has not voluntarily or gracefully even acquiesced in, let alone proposed, a single measure introduced by the British Government for the purpose, inter alia, of encouraging some sort of accommodation between unionism and nationalism. I taxed a unionist commentator with this the other day and challenged him to identify a single item which unionism as such had given voluntarily to nationalism as such. He had the cheek to refer to the fair employment legislation against which some unionists have fought a consistent rear guard action ever since its inception.

Instead we have had to listen to sob stories about how unionism has

been through hell this last twenty-five years. Any suggestion that other people apart from unionists have also been through hell these last twenty-five years, is often rejected or greeted with disdain, or is met with further sob stories from unionism's public relations hacks that unionism is faced with a devilish and hellish anglo/Irish/ American world wide conspiracy.

There are three great texts which are apparently daubed on the walls of the unionist hell. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, and more recently the Joint Declaration and the Frame Work Documents. If some unionists think that these texts are the work of the devil, then their hell is entirely of their own making. The first two are, quite simply, monuments to unionism's gross strategic failure and reckless intransigence; and people, mostly unionists, seem to forget that the Frame Work Documents were produced by the two Governments at the request of the parties who were unable, or some might say, unwilling to proceed to agreement after several years of talks. As I have said before, any politician who claims to have been surprised by the main points in the Frame Work Documents must have been asleep during the last five or six years.

But, some might ask, why do I claim those texts as monuments to unionism's gross and reckless intransigence? I would hardly need to work again if I had a pound for every time I heard a unionist this last ten or eleven years saying "If only we could get back to Sunningdale". If unionism now finds it difficult and distasteful facing the prospect having to reach an accommodation with nationalists and republicans, unionism, quite literally, only has itself to blame. There was a time when treating everyone civilly and decently in Northern Ireland would have gone a long way. While we may understand why Craig and the pre-war Unionists found that difficult in the days when De Valera was active on the 1937 constitution, there is really no excuse for Brookeborough's meanness of mind.

O'Neill was probably too late any way but even his efforts were opposed firstly by relatively small numbers of Paisleyites and later by the yuletide rush of intransigent unionism. We need look no further for the prime cause of the rise of republicanism. The rise of republicanism in the last quarter of the twentieth century is a dreadful monument to two or three generations of an inadequate, mean spirited and sectarian leadership of unionism. And the paradox of the last quarter of a century of Irish history is that the virtually continuous viciously immoral activities of the IRA has transformed attitudes in the South to the extent that the challenge of the historic compromise is now as great, or perhaps even greater, for republicanism, than it is for unionism.

IS A UNITED IRELAND POSSIBLE?

Let us look at what an historic compromise might involve or include. I think I ought to preface my remarks by saying that I think that the creation of a thirty-two county unitary state in Ireland ("a United Ireland"), which I do not myself advocate or aspire to, is an unlikely but nevertheless a theoretical possibility. But we should set out what is the only way in which it could or should happen in practice and that can only be by the freely given consent of, in theory, 51% of the voters in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. There are three important points in that formulation:-

- A. While, in theory, representative democratic practice suggests that 51% of the voters is sufficient, I suspect that in practice a higher proportion of voters in each jurisdiction might in fact be wise but, in view of what I have to say at point (C), I doubt if it is necessary to inquire further into what that higher percentage might be.
- B. Even if 51% (or more) of voters were found to be in favour in Northern Ireland, that alone would not be sufficient. 51% would also have to be found in the Republic of Ireland. It is the common view that such a majority may now exist. But there is not, so far as I can see, much evidence that people in the Republic want more than the minimum necessary to do with Northern Ireland. But whatever the present position, the important point to be made here is that, if a united Ireland is ever to be brought into being, the constitutional procedures for that to happen have to exist and operate in the South just as much as they do in the North.
- C. It is often suggested, by unionists who want to create anxiety in their supporters at election time, and sometimes by nationalists who want to tease those unionists, that the religious balance in the population of Northern Ireland will have levelled to 50/50 in the next ten to twenty years. It is therefore, they say, not simply a matter of time, but in fact that the time is only around the corner, when 51% of the electorate of Northern Ireland will be voting for a united Ireland. I have heard some unionists and, I think I am right in saying, the Rev. Ian Paisley declaring, that if that were to happen, they would abide by the democratic vote. Most recently (letter Belfast Telegraph 20th January) a unionist correspondent put it this way:-

"If the Nationalists in this part of the U.K. obtain a majority of votes here, there could then be a referendum in Northern

Ireland in which, if the Nationalists confirm this majority, they could bring about a United Ireland democratically, as allowed for by law, and thus change the status of Northern Ireland”.

I hope, although I do not expect, to set their minds at rest. No respectable demographer thinks it even possible, never mind probable, or certain, that the religious balance in the population will level off 40, 50 or 60 years into the next century. And if and when that were to happen, it would only require 10% of the then Catholic population to declare themselves content with the Union to swing what was supposed to have become a 51% vote in favour of the United Ireland into a 55/45 balance against it which might then take another generation to change.

DEALING WITH ANXIETY

In my view the chance of sufficient majorities in both jurisdictions contemporaneously voting for a United Ireland is such a remote possibility as to make it difficult to visualise, but I am conscious that many people do visualise it and are either worried about it, or welcome it, depending on where they are coming from. Can something be done to assist those who are worried about it (and we might be surprised by the fact that there might be as many worried about it in the South as there are in the North) and to set out the ground rules for those who would welcome it?

The answer is not simply that there is, but that it would be an entirely legitimate and honourable political project to set out now, in detail, precisely how a United Ireland might peacefully happen and the constitutional machinery by which it might happen. It would be wrong to leave it vague (which is what was essentially wrong with the idea of the Council of Ireland in 1974). If it is vague, we simply sweep the problem under the carpet and that is a recipe for worry and anxiety. Freely given consent is the key which can allay that worry and anxiety. A United Ireland should not happen and will not happen by accident, or by stealth, or by the machiavellian activities of the British Government, or by magic. It is far better to be precise about how, if it is to happen at all, it might, conceivably, happen by design and on purpose, and in doing so we address the worries and anxieties of those who honestly believe we are on some sort of, possibly gradual, but nevertheless inevitable, slippery slope to a United Ireland.

The fact that I do not think that a United Ireland is (a) desirable, (b) inevitable or (c) likely to happen inside three or four generations, does not alter the fact that a significant number of people do think we are on a slippery slope in that direction. If you agree that the clear, predominant,

moral issue in Northern Ireland politics is as I have set it out earlier, then the central conundrum of Northern Ireland politics is how unionists can reach an accommodation with nationalists which gives due recognition to the legitimate aspirations of both parties but which stops people sliding involuntarily down that so called slippery slope. How can we make the slope level? How can it be made non-slippery? Can we build gates which are kept closed until such time as they are opened by the people who make up the electorates in each of two separate jurisdictions?

THE REAL WORLD APPROACHES

Before discussing how that might be done, a number of bits of baggage need to be unpacked or disposed of. The first is that British withdrawal, (another phrase you do not hear so often these days) what ever it may mean, does not produce a United Ireland. It might produce a five and a half county or a five county repartitioned Northern Ireland (although even that is by no means certain) but Northern Ireland would continue, by all means impoverished and with many difficulties to face, but it would continue.

Secondly, there is not the slightest chance, if indeed there ever was such a chance, of the Republic rising up to take Northern Ireland by force. Even if there were an internal Nationalist rising assisted from the South, it might again result in some sort of repartition with very painful and nasty consequences for those on the wrong side of the line but what ever else happens, if force were involved, a United Ireland doesn't.

Thirdly, if unionism and nationalism do not achieve a mutually agreed accommodation we shall be consigned to, at best, a creeping joint authority between London and Dublin and, at worst, that joint authority combined with a creeping disengagement by Whitehall which is more likely to be economic and cultural rather than political and constitutional in form, but which may mark the start of a process of which the end result can not be calculated. Whatever else happens that won't be in Unionism's interest.

Then we need to identify clearly those issues in the three stranded talks process which might conceivably be conducive to a United Ireland and those which are not. Some Unionists seem to think, as we have already identified, that some measures which are in fact conducive to political and social justice within Northern Ireland would somehow lead to a United Ireland, as if by magic. I think it is necessary to make it clear that power sharing and proportionality in a Northern Ireland Assembly; minority blocking and protection mechanisms in an Assembly; a Bill of Rights and the entrenchment of fair employment, equal opportunity and human rights legislation; the encouragement and further development of political and cultural neutrality in the police service; the even handed application of public funds and patronage; the serious

targeting of social need, and the general democratisation of Northern Ireland's society, have got nothing to do with a United Ireland and there is no ~~magic~~ magic that can make it so. If you are amongst the unionists who think that anything from being nice to Catholics to serious attempts to advance social, cultural and political justice in Northern Ireland is part of a slippery slope to a United Ireland, you are wrong and you need to be told that in clear and unmistakable terms.

If on the other hand you are anxious about what is or should be entailed in a North/South institution and are worried about where that might lead, you are the person this paper is addressed to because whether you live in Northern Ireland and do not want to slide against your wishes into a United Ireland or whether you live in the Republic and want to keep Northern Ireland at arms length, you are entitled to see the clearly stated parameters and objectives of a North/South institution.

AN HONEST APPROACH

We live in a culturally and politically deeply divided society in Northern Ireland. The people of the South cannot and will not abandon northern nationalists who aspire to a United Ireland. Unionists wish, and are entitled, to remain part of the United Kingdom. All those, and other political aspirations, are legitimate. Only some of the methods used to advance them are not legitimate. No-one is entitled to use violence or physical intimidation or the fascist threat of force. Can the presently vicious circle of those aspirations be squared or reversed? The answer is yes, but we have to leave behind, and in this I am speaking as a civic unionist addressing fellow unionists, four of the old positions:-

- A. *We must openly acknowledge that a form of United Ireland, only of course to be achieved by peaceful means and by freely given consent, is a theoretical possibility, however long term and theoretical that may be; and we must give an account of how, and how only, that might be achieved.*
- B. *We must be prepared to discuss it in public and go to the heart of the issue openly rather than leaving it to the sort of nudge nudge, wink wink, process which gets nobody anywhere like the old Sunningdale Council of Ireland or worse still, leave it to the Governments to produce, because we haven't got the courage to do it ourselves;*
- C. *We must consign to the bin where it belongs the general proposition that you are either a friend or an enemy; that you cannot reach a compromise with your neighbour; that everything in politics and life is black and white; and that if you are British and Unionist you cannot reach an accommodation with Nationalists;*

- D. We must be prepared to reach for the historic accommodation between Unionism and Nationalism which is there for the grasping. We must give up thinking that nationalists will, or should, or must become good little unionists.

THE NORTH-SOUTH INSTITUTION

There are good policy reasons for suggesting that some policy areas should be dealt with on an all Ireland basis. We all, North and South, share a lack of energy resources which suggests that it would be common sense to have an all Ireland energy policy. We share the increasingly valuable assets of clean air and clean water. It is in the interests of all of us that environmental protection should be secured on an all Ireland basis. The same could be argued in respect of macrotransportation policy, in respect of the management of water ways, and in respect of at least some aspects of agricultural policy. It makes sense that such matters (or more or less) should be administered and, where appropriate, executed or carried out on an all Ireland basis.

The creation of a North/South Institution as a partnership between the two parliamentary institutions in Ireland, and in which certain specified matters can be dealt with on an all Ireland basis with some executive powers assigned to it, but which would require the consent of the parent parliamentary institution before different functions or different powers were added to it, would not stop Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom but would provide a clearly understood mechanism by which, by agreement only, that institution might develop by setting out clearly how and in what circumstances functions and powers could be added to it.

But let us be quite open in acknowledging that the constitutional machinery involved in such an arrangement would also, very precisely, be the constitutional machinery which gives due recognition to the aspiration of nationalists to a United Ireland.

For the first time those who have gone on about a United Ireland, whether in favour or against, would be faced with both the opportunities and the safeguards involved in defining the only way in which it could be achieved.

AN ALL-IRELAND POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION

It has been objected that a North/South Institution which would in fact be a partnership between the two parliamentary institutions in the island of Ireland and which would thus preserve the integrity of each, would be, in the words of a unionist commentator I heard recently, be "an All Ireland Political Administration." He was, I suspect, attempting to damn an institution which would indeed be political; which would indeed involve administration; and which would indeed be deliberately

intended to administer its specified limited functions through out the island of Ireland. He hoped in one neat phrase, to give that North/South Institution the character of, guess what, a United Ireland!

But a North/South institution along side which I still retain my British Passport; the Queen is still the Queen; I still vote in an election to return 18 M.P's to the mother of Parliaments; where my representative in the Northern Ireland Assembly has an opportunity to refer contentious matters to a Secretary of State who remains a member of the British Government; where the Union Jack still flies on an agreed number of occasions on Government buildings (but on fewer occasions on Police Stations which are not of course Government buildings) and in which I, if I live long enough, will join in the debate in the 21st Century about whether the United Kingdom with its 25 or 30 European allies goes to war with Islam; a North/South institution along side which all these things happen is a very funny sort of United Ireland. But if that is what a United Ireland means, I can live with it!

The truth is that a North/South Institution would indeed be an "all Ireland political administration" and deliberately so, but it would not be the United Ireland of republican mythology or anything like it. What would be created would be a situation in which a 32 County unitary state was off the agenda either for ever or for several generations to come, and in which a United Ireland could not happen by accident or by stealth, or by the Machiavellian actions of the British Government, or by magic.

BLOCKING THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

The key to blocking the slippery slope to a United Ireland is not to say that the aspirations of nationalists are to be forever disregarded. If you do that the slope will always be slippery and it will get steeper and steeper. The key is, having established how the Nationalist aspiration might be expressed and recognised, to set out for the benefit of all the only way in which the aspiration might happen, if indeed it is to happen at all. Freely given consent is the key and that consent is to be measured by achieving separate majorities in both the Dail and the Northern Ireland Assembly before any powers or functions are added to the North/South institution established as a result of the negotiations in the present talks process, followed by the accommodation in all three strands, and followed by the separate and contemporaneous referenda.

In his speech to his own Party Conference on the 19th of October 1996, Mr David Trimble said "We want to build a Northern Ireland comfortable with its unique heritage. We offer a genuine partnership to all the people of Northern Ireland".

Before I comment on the ordinary meaning of those words, I want to address a complaint that I may have taken them out of context. The words I have quoted follow a classic unionist comment on John Hume. Mr Trimble said "He always seems to need the support of the Irish Government. John you do not need this crutch. You should stand on your own feet and rely on your own strength. Just like us. We are not looking over our shoulders. We challenge the SDLP and the Government to go on now without Sinn Fein and with no back ward glances. It will be worth going on for (and I have already given you the rest of the words) we want to build a Northern Ireland comfortable with its unique heritage. We offer a genuine partnership to all the people of Northern Ireland".

Leave aside for the time being whether Mr Trimble might have thought it reasonable for Mr Hume to rely on the Irish Government if Mr Trimble relied on the British Government, or might have urged his own party to rely on its own strength. Leave aside for the time being whether his claim that he is not looking over his shoulders is credible. We may be excused for thinking sometimes that Mr Trimble's jigs at Drumcree were caused by some crick in his neck as he looked over his shoulder at Billy Wright or Robert Saulters or Ian Paisley.

The ordinary meaning of the words he used, what ever he intended by them, cannot reasonably exclude a deliberate search for arrangements which are intended to accommodate, and which do in fact accommodate, Unionism and Nationalism. It is the very existence of each of these political cultures which is "Northern Ireland's unique heritage". "A genuine partnership" can do no other than treat them as equals and equally deserving of esteem and recognition. "All the people of Northern Ireland" cannot exclude any significant section of them, including republicans.

In recent months much emphasis has, been placed on the need for vision and courage from the political leaders of unionism. What unionism needs as well, and what I for one would settle for, is common sense and civility. That must include some clarification from Mr Trimble. Does he know what the words he uses mean? Building a comfortable Northern Ireland - its unique heritage - a genuine partnership of all the people of Northern Ireland. If he does know what the words mean, does he mean it when he uses them? Or is he taunting us with fine words as he taunted the police by dancing a jig in front of them at Drumcree. If the leader of Unionism is to demonstrate that he deserves the title, he should stop dancing jigs, grow up, and, as Mr Spence said some months ago, "enter the real world". He may yet be able to show that he has what it takes to block the slippery slope but he had better act soon because his antics so far have simply made the slope more slippery.

The Author

DAVID S. COOK

Lives at Gilford, County Down and practices Law in Belfast. Member of Belfast City Council 1973-1985. Lord Mayor of Belfast 1978-1979. Member Northern Ireland Assembly 1982-1986. Founder Member of the Alliance Party and a former Deputy Leader of the Party. Has been Chairman of Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust since 1979. Was appointed Chairman of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland in June 1994 and served in that capacity until sacked by the Secretary of State in March 1996. Has been Chairman Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health & Social Services Trust since April 1994.

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