

SUB-COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 7 MAY 1992 TO  
DISCUSS THE QUESTION OF IDENTITIES

Government Team

Mr Hanley  
Mr Bell  
Mr Hill

Alliance Party

Mr McBride  
Mrs Bell

UDUP

Mr Campbell  
Mr Gibson  
Mr Vitty (part)

Talks Secretariat

Mr Lindsay

SDLP

Mr Haughey  
Mr Durkan

UUP

Mr Cunningham  
Mr Empey  
Mrs Bradford

Also Present

Mr Smyth

The Sub-Committee met from 2.15 pm to 6.15 pm with a break for tea.

2. There was a wide-ranging, comprehensive and informative discussion of the identities which exist in Northern Ireland and the differing perceptions of those identities across the communal divide.

3. It was agreed that each individual and community had the absolute right to define their own identity; and that that right and identity should be respected.

4. It was re-affirmed that any new political institutions should be such as to give expression to the identity and validity of each main tradition.

5. Attached are copies of the papers produced by each of the parties on this issue.

TALKS SECRETARIAT

## AGREEING THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM (SDLP Paper)

### Introduction

1. It is the view of the SDLP, clearly stated in our initial submission to the Talks last May, that "before we seek solutions to the Northern Ireland problem we ensure that we understand what the nature of that problem is and, just as importantly, that to the greatest extent possible we understand each other's perception of what it is". We believe that it is essential, as we recommence our dialogue, that we remind ourselves of the central points of that analysis of the problem and that we seek, in so far as it is possible to do so, agreement on the nature of the problem. The greater the degree of agreement which can be reached on the fundamental nature of the problem, the greater we believe is the likelihood of agreement on the structures we shall seek to build to address that problem.

### A Conflict of Identities

2. The SDLP believes that in its contemporary manifestation the Northern Ireland problem is in essence a conflict of two identities or, more precisely, the failure to devise political structures which accommodate the differences between, and allow full and mutual expression to, those two identities. Therefore, the first step towards ensuring that we do not fail at this attempt should be a full and open acknowledgement of those identities.

3. What follows is a brief, succinct reiteration of the essential characteristics of the nationalist and unionist identities as understood by the SDLP and the three other parties which participated with us in the New Ireland Forum.

4. The **Nationalist community** in Northern Ireland sees its identity as essentially Irish and part of the wider Irish family on the island of Ireland. Its vision and aspiration are 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.



5. The Unionist community, on the other hand, perceives itself as British. The majority of Unionists are also Protestant and, as such, are strengthened in their allegiance to the British Crown by the latter's essential Protestantism. Unionists generally also regard themselves as being Irish, although this does not include a willingness to live under all-Ireland institutions. However, many of them identify with Ireland and with various features of Irish life and their culture and way of life embrace much that is common to people throughout Ireland.

6. The SDLP acknowledges that the inter-party talks of last year contributed significantly to deepening our understanding of each other's points of view and, in particular, of our respective identities. At this early point in our renewed dialogue we invite all participants to agree a clear statement of the nature of the problem we are addressing and a determination to build new structures to accommodate the identities which lie at the heart of that problem.

7. We note that insofar as papers tabled last year by the two unionist parties defined the identity of the unionist community, nothing contradicted any element of the SDLP's outline definition. That definition was consistent with the analysis of the new Ireland Forum. It is worth pointing out that the Forum sought to project a more inclusive sense or definition of Irishness but not to relegate or subsume anyone's sense of Britishness within it. However, we note that the UUP (Common Issues and Propositions, p6) seems to be attempting to put forward a more inclusive definition of Britishness but we are concerned that there is an apparent tendency to subsume the Irish identity within it.

8. The fact that there is an interest in finding more inclusive definitions and expressions of either identity is encouraging. It is not that we anticipate or propose that we can agree to define either identity within the other. Rather we find attempts to be more inclusive an acknowledgement that the issue before us is accommodation of the two identities and that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.



9. Accommodation of the two identities requires parity of esteem including the right to recognition and expression of the respective identities. We have noted the DUP's statement, 28 June 1991, that the two identities "reach out beyond the confines of Northern Ireland itself". We acknowledge that Unionists require institutional expression of their lateral affinities with Britain. This was recognised by the Forum and is corroborated by unionist papers. It is not yet clear that Unionists recognise the requirement to accommodate the lateral affinities of those of the Irish identity who reside in Northern Ireland by allowing them appropriate institutional and symbolic expression for those affinities.

#### Implications for Political Progress

10. The SDLP does not see it as part of its task to convince Unionists of a particular definition of their identity. We seek to understand and to respect their definition of that identity. Not only do we realise that Unionists will test any political proposals against the requirements of respecting the unionist identity, but we too will have that consideration in mind in our own evaluations. We seek an acknowledgement that the nationalist community should have its definition of its own identity respected and that political proposals should be tested against the requirements of respecting the nationalist identity.

11. Given the essential characteristics of nationalist and unionist identities, the new political structures which we are seeking to build must ensure parity of esteem for both. We welcome the common recognition that the conflict of identities here has its context in the wider relationships between the two islands. We believe that the European Community offers both an example and context in which we can fully respect diversity of identity while working together on our common problems and interests.



## 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 maybe derived from locality, whether that be town, county, region or country, or from ethnic origin, religion, class or culture. Obviously several of these can inter-act, 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.

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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.



## UNIONISM, AN ANALYSIS OF OUR IDENTITY

(UDUP Paper)

The Unionist identity is essentially an expression of our BRITISHNESS, the ethos which exists in Ulster is not the same as that found elsewhere in the United Kingdom but neither is the Scots identity found other than in Scotland or the Welsh other than in Wales. The Union was intended to draw together the four diverse sections of the British people, that Union did not dilute each particular identity, Englishmen remain English and are no less so because of the Union, similarly Ulstermen (and women). The Unionist identity can be shown to be essentially British by analysing the various manifestations of Unionism, whether it is affinity to the Royal Family, close proximity and kinship particularly to the lowland Scots people or interest and participation in sports enjoyed by other Britons, Unionism can be said to be grounded in the work ethic which was a product of the Protestant Reformation which encompassed England, Scotland, Wales and the Northern part of Ireland.

Unionists then do not merely see themselves as British but every fibre of their being is so, the fact that many Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland see themselves as sharing that particular identity without wishing to align themselves with the more Political manifestations of Unionism is something which has not been given sufficient attention. If progress is to be made in creating a Northern Ireland where the advocate of any particular identity can be free to pursue and promote that identity we are not likely to have much success while there are attempts made to subsume our Unionism within some form of agreed or new Ireland. Making the Republic of Ireland more like Britain will not ensure that Unionists are less disinclined to join that Republic.

Unionism is in conflict with Nationalism in Northern Ireland, our task is to develop our identity in such a way that Nationalists do not feel threatened by our Unionism. We are at a loss many times to understand why they should feel threatened by the manifestation of our identity but that is not as important as the fact that they do.

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Unionism is strengthened in its resolve to remain distinctly British by the ongoing terrorist campaign, the more attempts there are to dislodge us from the Union the more intensely will burn the flame of resistance to that campaign. A people kept continuously under siege for decades can be forgiven if they tread warily when the enemy offers consultation rather than confrontation. English people are sometimes unfairly trademarked by a "stiff upper lip" image, the Ulster distinctiveness is supposedly that of a "rugged dour unyielding" individual, the Ulster identity has fashioned a very robust image due to the circumstances in which it has found itself but that has never prevented the genuine attributes of that identity from being made obvious to those who care to look eg hardworking, sincere, humorous, caring and holding deep convictions. Because of these attributes Unionism confidently asserts that it wishes to be seen for what it is, the identity common to almost all of the Protestant population in Northern Ireland as well as not a few Roman Catholics.



## 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 issues 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 perceptions, analyses and priorities. Clearly we understand the problems of Northern Ireland differently.

### AN ALLIANCE PAPER

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.

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 reinforce the sense of Northern Ireland's distinctness. If true, this would be a 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 more in common than that which divides 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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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 more in common than that which divides 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.



It is none the less self-evident that Northern Ireland is a bitterly divided society. There is little point in re-hashing 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.