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ON SATURDAY 17 APRIL 1993~~

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ENCOUNTER/BRITISH-IRISH ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE
OXFORD
SATURDAY 17 APRIL 1993

Congratulations to Encounter and the British-Irish Association for bringing so many people to Oxford this weekend. This conference is the latest of the many which the two organisations have separately planned to examine issues of concern to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Encounter put a particular stress on bringing together young people from the two countries. I welcome that effort. The BIA have helped bilateral understanding every year by bringing together leading people from both countries. It is logical for them to join forces today and invite younger politicians. I hope today's meeting is just the start of cooperation between the two organisations.

We live in a world of sovereign states. It is foolish to ignore this foundation of all international effort. There were 180 of us at the last count, and the number has recently grown yet again.

The principle of sovereign states produces, inevitably, strains and stresses of its own. We in Western Europe are lucky enough to have the confidence to see that states do not need to be ethnically homogeneous. We can see the possibility of multi-racial answers achieved by consent. Some in other parts of the world argue that splintering is an answer. They do not yet admit the advantages of staying together. They want tidy maps.

But we must be untidy cartographers, with imperfect maps. If states are to remain our key unit of international commerce, we must accept that the structure of those states needs some new thinking. States depend on the consent of their people. Pluralist solutions, taking many forms, will nearly always be the answer.

Let me offer some examples.

After the second world war, gradually, in different forms and at different speeds, African leaders took back control of their countries. At the same time, one might have thought, the national borders which were so clearly constructed by the imperial powers, for reasons of imperial logic, should have come under pressure. Straight lines drawn on a map for Bismarck or Lord Salisbury might not have been thought right for the post colonial order. Yet the maps of Africa now are not, in their outline, so far removed from those of the nineteenth century. The names may have changed; but the mosaic remains. Clearly those colonial frontiers had come to mean something real.

One wishes one could say the same about Yugoslavia. There splintering has been the rule. The fleeting opportunity of creating a Yugoslavia based on consent was thrown away, is now scorned, but will certainly be regretted as a last chance tragically lost. But again, here, it is apparent that the only chance of a solution is one where boundary changes are made by agreement, not wrenched by violence. New administrative structures may be needed. The Vance\Owen plan for Bosnia, with its ten autonomous provinces, may look like a spatchcock. Nothing neat, tidy, traditional about it. But it is an imaginative response to the particular problems of Bosnia. It is based on the principle of consent. Another tragedy, another last chance.

A third example, and this time from the rarified air of European Community negotiations, is the important article 3b which now stands at the front of the Maastricht Treaty, like a sentinel. This is the article which spells out the principle of subsidiarity, the way the Community and its member states should interact. The language of the article may be dry, but its effect should be to reinvigorate the way we do business. I remember, during those long and detailed negotiations, an Irish Minister quoting with approval a Dutch definition of subsidiarity : decisions must be taken at the level where they can be most effective, decentralised where possible, centralized where necessary. That is one example of many where Dublin and London see eye to eye. Neither of us want a European superstate. The nation state is our unit. From that starting point we can work effectively together as two countries, and together as a Community.

In all these three examples, though the state is the unit, the problems and the pressures are very different. So a second golden rule is that, while we live in a world of sovereign states, those states can only survive by respecting the variety within themselves.

One only has to look at the United Kingdom to recognise this. Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England are all part of the Union as a result of different acts of history. The patchwork of institutions which make up the four parts of our nation owes everything to history, and little to logic. No one designing a theoretical constitution would establish different administrative arrangements for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Three Secretaries of State, but not three peas in a pod - each with different powers and responsibilities.

We can recognise variety in a number of ways. As a region, as for example, in Spain, where the Catalonian region has powers which in other states would be held by the centre. In Brazil the regional governors hold and exercise power in ways that those at the centre of power in Brasilia would envy.

Or that variety can be recognized as a community within the society of the state. One only has to travel the large cities of Europe, Paris, Birmingham, Rome, Hamburg, to be aware of the variety of communities which makes up the life of these places. The art is to legitimise the activities of these communities, bring them into the body of society.

In South Tyrol, for example, in northern Italy, the German-speaking community is reconciled to Italian government. They are a community within a nation. A smaller example are the Aland islanders, a distinct community which has been accommodated within Finland. At last week's opening of the European Community's negotiations with Norway, the Norwegian delegation included a representative of the Sami, an arctic people. His crimson jacket stood out among the grey suits, but he was welcome and, I hope, comfortable.

So we must work through the nation state, but sustaining it by embracing diversity, whether in regions or communities.

How does this approach work when we come to look at Ireland?

The Talks last year made progress. The proceedings were not public, and I think that was sensible. They enabled the Northern Ireland parties, together with the British Government, to identify common themes and principles which should underlie any new political institutions in Northern Ireland, and to examine possible structures which might reflect these.

At a later stage, delegations discussed fundamental aspects of relationships within the island of Ireland, and of the realities underlying them, including constitutional issues and questions of identity and allegiance. They examined the scope for enhanced cooperation within the island of Ireland, in the social, economic and security fields, among others. They considered the nature of structures which might best serve such cooperation. In parallel, the two governments, as co-signatories of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, addressed possible principles for a new and more broadly-based agreement, and possible intergovernmental arrangements. They did this in liaison with the other participants.

Nobody now seriously supposes that the border can be swept away without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. But the debate has moved on. There is a stronger sense of realism. The framework of relationships within which the people of Northern Ireland can run their own affairs within the United Kingdom must accommodate the identities and wishes of both main parts of the community.

In new talks the Republic of Ireland has a crucial role, not as a rival for sovereignty, but as a partner in relationships between the two governments and within the island of Ireland, relationships based on trust and mutual respect. These need to be further developed if there is to be long-term political stability in Ireland, an end to political violence and a return to the decencies of normal democratic life. The Republic has an entirely legitimate interest in this. Determination to resist terrorism is stronger than it ever has been, both in Britain and Ireland, in the wake of recent terrible events in Warrington and sectarian killings in the North. The Anglo-Irish Agreement now provides a framework through which all this can be expressed. Both governments are ready to contemplate alternative arrangements arrived at in discussion with all concerned.

Last year's talks closed with a statement that further dialogue was desirable and necessary. The Irish General Election provided a natural intermission, which is enabling each of the participants to take stock.

The Prime Minister, last week, said that the pause should now come to an end. He has suggested that the dialogue between the main constitutional parties and the British and Irish Government must be resumed. The talks need an atmosphere of flexibility. It is encouraging to note the Irish Government's willingness to initiate and incorporate constitutional change in the context of an overall settlement. This provides a positive context for further dialogue.

But there is tough work ahead, for all of us. It will be hard going because violence creates fear and hatred. Fear and hatred are like cancerous cells. They infect the body. They inhibit and distort its natural development. In that fevered atmosphere the attitudes and rhetoric of political leaders have sometimes been too pat. It is simple to hold to the safe way, to stay in the trenches, to avoid anything which smacks of imagination. But the sad fact is that trench warfare was the most murderous of all forms of warfare, and settled little.

After Warrington, after a particularly bloody series of sectarian murders in Northern Ireland, there has been a surge of opinion in all parts of the UK and the Republic. Mrs McHugh marched with the ordinary people of Ireland in Dublin on 28 March. She then came to London to join the British people in their expression that the time for change had now come. East and West of the Irish Sea more is required of us, particularly those of us who will be party to the resumed talks. Violence cannot bring peace. But peace can bury violence. We need a lift of the imagination, thinking in new ways about problems rooted in history. The more complex the history, the more imaginative we must be. We must not ignore history, but draw the right lessons from it. Patrick Mayhew and Dick Spring have shown us the right path.

Europe is full of regions; our differences are our lifeblood. But it is by working together that we move forward. Encounter and the British Irish Association have brought us together in Oxford this weekend. In the middle ages the Irish and English worked together by sending missionaries from both islands to the Low Countries and Germany, converting the local tribes to Christianity. At Echternach in Luxembourg we together taught the inhabitants a peculiar dance, two steps forward and one step back. The total effect was described as progress, if rather slow and cautious. I hope that is what we are embarked on at the moment.