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(Dublin 2.)

Response to the Fianna Fáil Discussion Paper  
presented to the Forum on 17 November 1994.

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The Fianna Fáil paper was interesting and provocative. However, I believe that we can learn more from its deficiencies than from its strengths. This is particularly true because of the total absence of Unionist participation from the proceedings of the Forum. For this reason I believe it is essential that we consistently attempt as an imaginative exercise to understand and encompass a hypothetical Unionist response to such documents. The historical analysis with which the paper opens is inadequate and partisan and inevitably fails to do justice to the complexities of the development of strands in Irish history such as Young Ireland and the Cultural Revival or Literary Renaissance. These are bracketed together as efforts by the Nationalist side to "unite the two traditions" whereas, in fact, they were quite the opposite, or at least had the opposite effect.

References to discrimination against the Northern minority and the abuse of civil rights can undoubtedly be historically justified, but the paper happily ignores less savory aspects of our own

experience. Examples can be easily found such as the employment by the legal representatives of the Irish Government of elements of the notorious "appalling vista" judgement of Lord Denning in the Nicky Kelly case, or the statement by the then Taoiseach three years ago that a case brought by an Irish citizen (myself) in which there was found to be a violation of fundamental human rights by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg was not a matter of priority. Moreover accusations of gerrymandering have never been confined exclusively to the North of Ireland, although in the south these accusations refer to the securing of party rather than sectarian advantage. We also conveniently tend to ignore the fact that the property qualification for voting in local elections which lay behind a part of the "one man one vote" campaign was until comparatively recent times universally applied throughout these islands although its sectarian impact was only evident under the Stormont regime because of the special distribution of population in the North of Ireland, which was exploited by the Unionist Parties.

We are inclined to flatter ourselves in the Republic that we have treated our religious minorities with justice and tolerance. This is

very largely true and is an honourable record which it would perhaps seem churlish to gloss by the recital of a small number of areas of largely unconscious discrimination. It should, however, be pointed out that the Anglican/Protestant minority in the South is numerically weak, financially strong, and politically docile. If we imagine instead of this a hypothetical situation in which this minority were

1. more critically balanced at say 40% rather than 3% of the population
2. concentrated largely in areas of urban deprivation
3. suspicious of and withholding loyalty from the institutions of the state
4. protective of an armed guerrilla movement committed to the overthrow of the existing state and its reunification with the sister island by military force and which cynically targeted those members of its own community who "collaborated" by joining the police or army, in order to heighten the perception of these institutions as essentially sectarian -

can we be sure that we would then be totally guiltless of the kind of repression and discrimination undoubtedly practised by the

Stormont authorities.

It is, perhaps, a particularly difficult thing to search for our faults when we consider ourselves blameless. But we shall never convince others of their errors by concentrating on advertising our own virtues. The capacity for self criticism is not an Irish quality North or South but may well be a discipline we could profitably practice in preparation for peace. The Republic is at first glance so homogeneous a society that one can understand how many decent Irish people would be hurt and bewildered at any questioning of our commitment to tolerance and pluralism. Because of this apparent homogeneity it is easy unconsciously to assume that everyone in the South is white, heterosexual, Roman Catholic, nationalist (and male!).

We should recall

- the negative impact upon the Church of Ireland population in the South of the Ne Temere decree
  
- the recently published claims of the former Papal Nuncio,

Dr. Alibrandi, to have defeated the Government in two recent referenda

- the controversial and tendentious sermon of Archbishop Dermot Clifford at the Roman Catholic service this Autumn to open the legal term at which, according to newspaper reports, attending members of the judiciary and other elements of the legal profession were publicly rebuked for not conforming more closely to Vatican social policy
- the refusal until recently of members of any government to give recognition to commemoration of those who died in two world wars despite the very significant participation of Irish personnel in these conflicts
- the introduction of the so called pro-life amendment despite the strong opposition of the minority churches who felt that the Constitution was not an appropriate place for the insertion of such material.

These things are, I think, worthy of mention because they are

almost universally ignored.

I recall vividly the celebrations of Easter 1966 in which the spiritual significance of Easter was entirely subsumed in the pageantry of Catholic Nationalist triumphalism from which I am perfectly certain I was not alone in feeling excluded and alienated as an Irish citizen of a different tradition. Indeed, 1916 itself has been revised into a popular uprising whereas it would be more accurate to describe it as deriving from an unrepresentative idealistically motivated but essentially elitist group. Moreover some of its inherent contradictions can be seen in the very mixed parentage and origin of many of the signatories of the Proclamation including the leader P. H. Pearse who, despite the fact that his father was English, wrote in *An Claidheamh Soluis* that "the Gael shall extract a fair measure of justice from the Gall by the sword". It is difficult to see how this kind of confused and racially tinted sentiment could assist in overcoming cultural divisions.

Page 6 of the Fianna Fáil document establishes as a basic principle the setting up of democratically mandated North/South institutions with executive powers. The difficulty with this is one of

perception. If such institutions are imposed upon a people for whom they are not a natural expression of their wishes or of their identity there is a danger that they may be seen as alien, hostile and threatening. For this reason it is particularly important that we are sensitive to Unionist perception from the ground up. This point is reinforced for me by a further point from page 6. It is stated that "reconciliation and trust between both communities in Northern Ireland and both traditions in Ireland should be established by other confidence building measures". This is inarguably true. However, I was concerned by the Taoiseach's oral response to questioning on this item. When asked to give specific instances he listed, according to my notes, the following points:-

1. Recognition of the Irish language
2. Police and army reduction
3. Opening of border roads
4. An end to police harassment and searches.

Again it is difficult to quarrel with any of these points. The problem is that they reflect exclusively the concerns of one

community. It is in my opinion significant that when questioned about reconciliation and trust between both communities the interests of one community alone sprang naturally and automatically to the Taoiseach's mind. This highlights the deficiency of imagination from which we all tend to suffer.

For these reasons I have to say that the content and discussion surrounding the Fianna Fáil document is worrying. If we are serious at all about attempting to engage Unionist representatives in dialogue then it is difficult to understand what role the presentation of this document could play. I certainly believe that the Unionist population in Northern Ireland would regard it as a brush off.

In my opinion we must attempt imaginatively to encompass the ideas, aspirations and cultural background of those who are quite different to us. It would be ironic, indeed, if the Forum were to succeed in normalising and including Sinn Féin as a political party while simultaneously alienating and demonising the Unionist tradition. We must not simplify complex issues of historical background.



While we are in the South naturally supportive of the Nationalist aspiration for the unification of the island it may be legitimately asked to what extent do we all genuinely respect the parallel Unionist aspiration. It seems to me that significant elements in this Forum are only prepared to respect Unionism at that moment when it is hoped that it will abandon its core value of union with Britain and show evidence of transforming into passive Protestant acceptance of the Republic i.e. we withhold respect from the Unionist chrysalis until it becomes a republican butterfly. This does not represent a very high degree of respect.

Last Sunday Professor C.E.J Caldicott of University College Dublin gave a lecture in St. Patrick's Cathedral about the legacy of the Huguenots. It is salutary to remember that among the different strands making up the Protestant tradition in Ireland must be included the Protestant Huguenot victims of religious persecution on the continent. Professor Caldicott opened his talk with a quotation from an anonymous Huguenot writer of the 1690s. This 17th century writer comments

"this comparison of the penal laws of France and England is

proof of the fact that mankind is not very wise. I exclude no religious denomination in this judgement.

Protestants claim that French legislation is the work of darkness whereas those of the Roman faith say the same of the penal laws of England. We are obliged to believe both sides, for they are both right because they say the same thing, which is that by their common accord both sets of laws are the result of distemper and injustice".

It is interesting to note that Professor Caldicott later referred to the Huguenot guerrilla leader Jean Cavalier who, having escaped to Dublin, printed his memoirs of the wars of the Cévennes. In the opening passage Jean Cavalier writes urging his audience

"not to condemn persecution and plead for penal laws with the same breath".

Professor Caldicott comments

"this exposure of the inhuman, two way symmetry of persecution and terrorism is startlingly modern. The implications of such a position can't be lost on us in the Ireland of 1994".

I believe that in Northern Ireland what we have seen is in fact just such a symmetry of suffering, persecution and terrorism. I believe it essential that we counter this tragic symmetry with a solution that must have a similar but this time positive symmetry of understanding.

Whatever about the problems of starting by imposing institutions that may be perceived as a threat by those on the ground, there should be less difficulty in starting with more modest proposals. The rebuilding of the electricity interconnector is a good example and I understand this project is already started. The mobilisation of other common resources should also be possible in the fields of gas, tourism, agriculture, education, television and the twinning of towns north and south. It is clear that common objectives exist between farmers north and south, between tourist boards north and south and this commonality should be exploited. With regard to education both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland are equally guilty in fostering segregated education.

In removing preconceptions the impact of broadcasting is, I am sure, significant. Development of positive relations and programme exchanges between RTE on the one hand and BBC/ITV on the other could play a significant role in informing the two communities and familiarising each with the ethos and values of the other in a sympathetic manner.

Moreover I do not think it unimaginable that individual members

of political parties North and South should establish good working relations nor that this should include at least some strands of Unionism. If one removes the troubled matter of the "national question" from the equation it is clear that Fianna Fáil in the South plays Tweedledum to the Unionist's Tweedledee in the North - both have a majoritarian ethos, a feeling that they are the natural and inevitable party of government, both have a devotion to "core values" and inspire strong tribal loyalties among their adherents.

It would be a mistake to assume that disadvantage exists solely in the Catholic ghettos of Northern Ireland. I live in Dublin's north inner city. In my electoral ward there is a level of adult unemployment reaching to 85%. Fortunately for the authorities civil strife has as yet been largely avoided because there are no historic cultural or sectarian fault lines paralleling this sector of disadvantage as there are in the North. However, I believe strongly that the economic discrimination in this area is as real and serious a problem as that obtaining in Protestant and Roman Catholic working class areas in the North of Ireland. Were we to be able to demonstrate that we could tackle these problems in our own cities effectively we would be in a much better position to

attract the favourable attention of marginalised groups in the other section of the island.

I had the personal experience of living under the operation of systematically discriminatory penal legislation in this country which governments of all shades were, until recently, notoriously reluctant to reform - the anti gay imperial statutes of 1861 and 1885. I was, therefore, glad that Mr. Gerry Adams included a reference to sexuality in his speech at the opening of the Forum.

I have been recently rereading Edmund Burke on the Penal Laws against Catholics. He writes

"in this situation men not only shrink from the frowns of a stern magistrate; but they are obliged to fly from their very species. The seeds of destruction are sown in civil intercourse, in social habitude. The blood of wholesome kindred is infected. Their tables and beds are surrounded with snares. All the means given by Providence to make life safe and comfortable are perverted into instruments of terror and torment".

This was exactly my experience as a citizen of the Republic who happened to be gay, and I am glad that the late coalition government saw fit to remove discrimination in this area.

I have to say in conclusion that the experience of alienation and exclusion is mirrored by my participation in this Forum. It surprises me that arrangements for the Forum are so formal, rigid and hierarchical in structure. Everything possible militates against the participation of the alternate members. We are placed along a wall in uncomfortable and unsuitable seating with no provision for writing, taking notes etc. We are separated from the speaking table by a thoroughfare populated during the public sessions by television cameras, electricians, strands of cable, etc. The operation of these cameras is inevitably awkward and one is frequently inadvertently trampled upon by their operators. The alternate members are to all intents and purposes wallflowers. It remains a mystery to me how we can seriously address matters of inclusiveness, parity of esteem etc. while simultaneously effectively excluding over half our own members from participation. This is a particular problem for the independent members of the Senate in the light of the permanent occupancy of the speaking position by Deputy Neil Blaney representing the four independent T.Ds to the disadvantage of the representatives of the five Independent Senators. This contrasts with the full representation of the Green Party who have only one Oireachtas Member and the personal seat

established for Senator Gordon Wilson. I understand that there are some moves afoot to resolve this problem but as yet have not been apprised of what these moves may be.

Senator David Norris

25 November 1994