

The Nature of the Problem and the Principles

Underlying its Resolution

- Discussion Paper from Fianna Fáil

for the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

The New Ireland Forum Report analysed the nature of the Northern Ireland problem and the principles underlying its resolution, in a way that remains valid and that commanded the consensus of all the constitutional nationalist parties at that time and since. It provided important source material for the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Joint Declaration.

The Nature of the Problem

The problem of Northern Ireland remains the unresolved issue in relations between Britain and Ireland. It is the remaining product of a centuries old policy by Britain (and previously England) to control Ireland for its own strategic reasons, a policy that has now been disclaimed in the Downing Street Declaration. In the process, two political traditions were forged, one whose

primary loyalty was to Britain, and the other whose focus of loyalty was to Ireland and to its people.

One of the enduring legacies of that policy, even when the need for it has long since disappeared, is the persistence of a deeply divided community in Northern Ireland. Over the past two centuries great efforts have been made to unite the two traditions, the United Irishmen, Young Ireland, the Cultural Revival, but they did not have lasting success in overcoming the deeper divisions. Initiatives of Unionist origin to the same end included the Wyndham land purchase scheme, the Co-operative Movement, the Irish Association of 1938, and the reformist tendency of Captain O'Neill and power-sharing experiment led by Brian Faulkner. On the other hand, the divisions between the two traditions were exploited and widened for political reasons to try and prevent Home Rule for Ireland, and failing that to win the exclusion of Ulster, with paramilitary means being used to exercise a Unionist veto. This accelerated a resort to force on the Nationalist side to win full independence for Ireland, and in turn the price for this involved a forced acceptance of partition as a fait accompli in 1921. The successful opposition to Sunningdale later followed the same pattern as 1914. In contrast, the Anglo-Irish

Agreement was maintained by the British Government despite massive Unionist street protests.

The 1920-1 settlement broadly satisfied the desire for independence of the majority in the South, and the Unionist desire to remain under separate continuing British jurisdiction. The guarantees on paper in the Government of Ireland Act, 1920 of non-discrimination, proportional representation, and of North-South institutions intended to lead to eventual reunification, (and of a Boundary Commission) were all quickly scrapped or ignored. Both the formation of the State of Northern Ireland in line with the wishes of the Unionist tradition, and its practice as a one-party hegemony that actively discriminated against the minority, meant that it failed to win Nationalist consent.

- * 1) Problem was non-implementation of G.O.I. Act.
- 2) Eventual reunification was envisioned within the UK.
- Constitution depends on Act of Union 1800.

The demand for equality and civil rights in the late 1960s were not accommodated by the Unionist Government, and were strenuously resisted by elements within the Unionist population. Attempts at repression and ensuing violence contributed to the collapse of internal political institutions in Northern Ireland in 1972. No effort to restore them since has as yet been successful for any length of time. In their absence, the British Government has assumed

direct political responsibility for Northern Ireland. The violence of the last 25 years has undoubtedly contributed to and reinforced the prolonged political stalemate.

The problem can be expressed as an absence of political consensus at the most fundamental level. While Unionists withhold their consent from a united Ireland, Northern Nationalists have to a greater or lesser degree withheld their consent from Northern Ireland as a legitimate political entity.

The rest of the Irish people in the South, whatever their continuing reservations about the original legitimacy of partition and certainly their rejection of its one-sided practice, have virtually all come to accept at this point that it would be wrong as well as impractical to coerce the people of Northern Ireland into a united Ireland, against the wishes of a majority there. This view is clearly expressed by the Taoiseach in the Downing Street Declaration.

Principles underlying its Resolution.

Any new political agreement must have substantial cross-community support, and, since it must also deal with North-South relations, should constitute a new

act of self-determination by the Irish people, exercised concurrently. The British Government have accepted in the Joint Declaration that the Irish people, North and South, will alone determine their future. The British Government must play an active role, as they have undertaken to do in the Joint Declaration, in promoting an agreement between them.

The resolution of the Northern Ireland problem over time and the establishment of a just and lasting peace will depend on agreement being reached on the following principles, among others:

- A balanced accommodation needs to be further developed which will accommodate in the short to medium term fundamental and legitimate constitutional differences, and provide a framework whereby they can be democratically resolved both now and in the future. Such an accommodation must preserve the inalienable birthright to Irish citizenship of those living in the North.

- The bedrock of any viable political consensus in the North must be establishment of full equality of treatment and parity of esteem for both

individuals and the communities from which they come, with democratic institutions in Northern Ireland based on the principle of partnership.

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- The setting up of democratically mandated North-South institutions with executive powers, is essential both for practical reasons to serve common interests between North and South against the backdrop of the European Single Market, and for reasons of identity as a reflection of the Irish dimension.
- The negotiation of political settlement should be accompanied in parallel by, and culminate in, a comprehensive programme of demilitarisation, a * fundamental reform of policing to make it more acceptable across the community, and the restoration of civil liberties. (not just in the North)
- Reconciliation and trust between both communities in Northern Ireland and both traditions in Ireland should be established by other confidence-building measures. (all one-way)
- Efforts to reach an agreement based on these principles and putting them into practice are indispensable, if we wish in time to be able to move on

to the stage of Irish unity by agreement, which remains a valid long-term goal.

17 November, 1994

* Set up by Westminster & Dublin - people from Assembly & Dail.