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FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Submission from

Senator Gordon Wilson

on

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

AND

THE PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING ITS RESOLUTION



At the outset let me say that I do not represent any party, organisation or creed here. If I seem to emphasise the personal pronoun that is because I am here as an individual member of the Forum . While I lay no claim to represent anyone but myself, my words may reflect the views of some people in Northern Ireland.

I often regret that as a young man I did not stand up and speak out against injustice and wrong when I saw them happening in my part of the world. I drew back because I regarded politicians as hard men and I stayed comfortable. Now I hope that my words may help to soften our hearts and change the attitudes which fostered that injustice and the long years of violence in our corner of God's garden.

### 1. The Nature of the Problem

I do not intend to give a long historical analysis of the problem in Northern Ireland. Many historians and political commentators have done that already. Perhaps what I can do is give a layman's view of the problem , a view which others like me may relate to. There are two main elements in the problem of Northern Ireland, a clash of cultures and a crisis of trust. And there are several related issues which complicate the problem.



### 1.1. Clash of Cultures

Religion more than politics colours the thinking of the people in Northern Ireland. The British culture is part of the heritage of the Protestant community. The Irish culture is allied predominantly to the Catholic community. (When I use the term Catholic here I am in every case referring to the Roman Catholic church.) This has led to the dangerous stereotyping of Protestant as British and Catholic as Irish. It is not totally true, but there is enough truth in it to make it acceptable to many on and beyond this island. As so often here, the perception is more powerful than the reality. There has been a history of ascendancy, dominance and intolerance on both sides of that divide,

### 1.2. Crisis of Trust

It is not popular to state this and it is often papered over that people here do not trust one another. The basis of any lasting relationship is trust. Where that no longer exists there is little or no possibility of forming a stable society.



### 1.3. United Ireland

The great majority of the three quarters of a million Protestant people in Northern Ireland want to be British not Irish. Ninety five percent of them, if asked, would deny their Irishness. They are happy to describe themselves as Ulstermen or Tyrone men or Belfastmen but they believe that to call themselves Irish would be the first step towards acknowledging the possibility of a united Ireland. There is no doubt that in the minds of many of the Unionist and Protestant people in Northern Ireland the road to a united Ireland is the road to Rome. Their greatest fear is that they will be swallowed up by Catholicism. They know that in the past the Catholic church has played a significant part in affairs of state in the Republic.

For those people I would like to say here that from my unique position as a Senator in the Irish government for the past two years I have not seen any direct evidence of an input from the Catholic church in affairs of state. I am aware too that the Irish government has passed some laws which do not conform with the teaching of the Catholic church.

Within the Northern Irish Catholic community there are a growing number of 'comfortable' people who do not want to break from Britain. In my opinion they



know that united Ireland cannot provide the economic advantages they enjoy under the present administration.

#### 1.4. Hearts and Heads

North and south, there is another division that we cannot ignore : the gap between head and heart. The heads of many of these 'comfortable' Catholics say that they are better off in Britain but when they get into a polling booth their hearts may hanker for old Ireland. Equally, there are Catholics in the south who do not want to know about a united Ireland largely for two reasons. One, it would create a twenty five percent minority which would be difficult to control, and, two, because the Republic cannot afford it. But in the polling booth they too may feel the pull of old Ireland.

#### 1.5. Unemployment

This is a major problem in this country, both north and south, and will remain so for a long time. Indeed, there are some who say that it will get worse in a less labour-intensive economy. Perhaps we need to be more honest with people, particularly with the young, and to admit that it is no longer possible for all to have



employment. Such people have their pride too and need to feel that they are not regarded as second class citizens, and need to be constantly reminded that the government of the day cares for them.

### 1.6. The RUC

Again, perception is important here. It is not my job to defend the RUC but I believe that it is the victim of misperception. It is regarded by many as a Protestant force, rather than a service, which is for Protestant people and which is anti-Catholic. The reality is that most law-abiding citizens feel satisfied with the service they get from the RUC.

Of course the RUC has made mistakes. Nevertheless, it has, in my opinion, done a very good job under enormous terrorist pressure. Hundreds of its members have lost their lives in defending all of the people of Northern Ireland. The RUC barracks look like fortresses because they have been under consistent attack from the IRA.



## 2. Principles Underlying the Resolution

We should make haste slowly. I said this at the inaugural meeting of the Forum and I think it bears repetition. Peace does come 'dropping slow' and the problems of four hundred years will not be solved in three months or maybe even in three years. We must be patient and persevere.

The Framework Document from the British and Irish Governments will be a crucial influence on the work of the Forum. Its proposals will, hopefully, help to concentrate our minds and sharpen the focus of our debate.

I believe firmly that one day a united Ireland will come. Indeed, the former Taoiseach said that he could not see it coming in his lifetime. Many Unionists and Protestants in Northern Ireland welcomed that statement because it removed their fear that they would be attacked overnight and dragged into a united Ireland against their wishes.

In the meantime, politicians must decide on a form of government which will be fair and which will be seen to be fair, to which all the people of Northern Ireland can be loyal. They must devise an interim structure or administration on the way to a united



Ireland. It seems to me that the Irish government has a responsibility to persuade the Unionist and Protestant people of Northern Ireland that their best future is in a united Ireland. This will not be easy but it must be done.

## 2.1. Referendum

I have not met anybody in my province who does not want peace. The people of Northern Ireland must be consulted in a referendum simultaneous to, but separate from, that conducted in the Republic of Ireland. So far, all the delegations here, with the exception of Sinn Fein, have said this. It is a right which cannot be denied to the people of Northern Ireland who, whatever the future may hold, live today in the territory comprising the six counties and governed by Britain, which is the sovereign power.



## 2.2. United Ireland

Most of my friends, who are moderate people, do not want to know about a united Ireland. This is true of the majority of Unionists and Protestant people. They do not want any constitutional interference by the Irish government in their lives, but they could live with cross-border institutions based on common interests and I would encourage more efforts of this kind. There are already examples of this cooperation which are proving successful.

Most important of all we need to cross the borders that exist within Northern Ireland and to develop more initiatives which will bring the two communities together. This is especially important for young people. I have seen the fruits of such exercises in the form of the *Spirit of Enniskillen Bursary Award Scheme* which covers both communities across the province and is one of the best exercises, if not perhaps the best, in community relations that exists today, but it is open to only fifty young people per year. Therefore I feel we need to look at developing fully the scheme entitled *Education for Mutual Understanding*, now known as the *Cross-community Contact Scheme* which is open to all schools in Northern Ireland and affords far greater opportunities for children to learn from and about each other and do away with some of the myths we have grown up with.



Integrated education of itself does not hold all the answers. The primary values are learnt at home and in the community. Parents need to learn to be open-minded. Likewise, the churches should look long and hard at the stances they take.

### 2.3. RUC

Much has been said during our debates about reform of the RUC, renaming the force or creating two separate forces.

Change is beginning within the RUC. The Chief Constable is a Dublin man and several high-ranking officers are Catholics. There is already good communication at social and official level between the Gardai and the RUC. Some members of the RUC would look kindly on a change of title but the Unionists will not easily relinquish the royal connection.

As citizens we need to learn to trust and support our police. How can we expect others to protect us if we do not support them ? It is difficult for young Catholics



to join an organisation they perceive as alien but they should be encouraged to do so. This will reassure the doubters that the RUC works for them too and that they will be treated justly.

#### 2.4. Employment

We need to develop greater business cooperation between north and south and to handle carefully and skilfully the money we get from Europe and America. This should be used to enhance local industrial schemes rather than to assist multinational enterprises setting up here.

#### 2.5. Three Rs

I believe that any hope for a resolution of the problem in Northern Ireland rests on three Rs : respect, resolve, reaching out.



### 2.5.1. Respect

To repeat the words I used in my submission to the Opsahl Commission : ' For too long people in Northern Ireland have been shouting when they should have been talking and talking when they should have been listening.' If our hearts and attitudes are to soften we must talk and, above all, listen to one another. By listening carefully , each side can learn to trust the other and to respect the other's point of view, even if they cannot agree with it .

It is strange that we who have such a reputation for accepting foreign visitors with warmth and friendship are unable to accept our neighbour's right to think differently to ourselves. We have to learn to accommodate the differences within our own society.

### 2.5.2. Resolve

For that respect and trust to grow people on both sides of the border need to resolve to visit the other part of this island. I would encourage folk at every level to come north to meet people and to discover that the people of Northern Ireland are decent people and vice versa . This can also be arranged on a semi-formal basis through



schools, businesses and social clubs organising outings and exchange programmes. Again, it is strange that we send our children to France and Spain to learn languages but not to the other end of our own country to learn how their neighbours live.

### 2.5.3. Reaching Out

Although at the end of the day the politicians have to come up with a technical solution, the people on both sides of the community must reach out and share the very many things we hold in common. We can never agree on everything but let us at least agree to differ in peace. Let us learn to find a new way to live together based on the things we share, not least of which is the piece of earth we inhabit and above all our common Maker.

Surely the human mind is wise enough, or there are men and women wise enough and with enough of the love of God in their hearts to be able to find a solution for all the people in Northern Ireland. If it can happen, as it appears to be happening, that the South Africans, with their vast land and countless millions of people, can find a way forward, surely we, in our corner of God's garden, can find an answer to our problem.



To close I would like to quote the words of John Hewitt, an Ulster poet whose theme was the common heritage too easily and too often overlooked by the communities in Northern Ireland :

Speak peace and toleration. Moderate

your tone of voice, and everywhere avoid

what might provoke. Good will must be deployed

in efforts to restore our balanced state .

To long-held views sincere give proper weight;

one brief rash word and all might be destroyed.