

SUB 424

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Dear Mr Kirwan

Further to a telephone conversation with Tim O'Connor, I enclose a submission to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

I come from a traditional Protestant and unionist background. My father helped form the National Union of Protestants with Ian Paisley in the late 1940s, and was active in Orange circles for the greater part of his life. He represented Clifton at Stormont during the 1950s as an Independent Unionist. In 1969 he was defeated when standing as an anti-O'Neillite unionist candidate for the seat of Duncairn.

I am currently a member of the East Belfast constituency of the Ulster Unionist Party and a delegate to the Ulster Unionist Council. I am also Secretary of the recently formed Unionist Labour Group of which Cllr Michael McGimpsey is Chairperson.

I am extremely keen to participate in the Forum and regard the Unionist policy of non-involvement as regrettable. I should add that the conception of unionism to which I subscribe is not constrained by the traditional background from which I come. It is a conception which, unfortunately, receives inadequate attention, but which I claim is capable of making a positive contribution to Northern Ireland's political affairs. I would relish the opportunity to expand upon this claim at the Forum.

Yours sincerely,

*Norman Porter*



NORTHERN IRELAND: A "UNIONIST" VIEW OF THE WAY AHEAD.

A SUBMISSION TO THE FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Dr Norman Porter

The submission I'd like to make on the political situation in Northern Ireland divides into three categories which for convenience sake I'll describe as follows: distractions from politics; the focus of politics; and the aims of politics. Let me give a quick sketch of the principal entailments of each of these.

1.                   DISTRACTIONS FROM POLITICS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1.1. To claim that there are distractions from politics, especially given that such distractions sometimes have the label "political" attached to them, prompts the question of what I take politics to be. Without engaging in prolonged definitional disputes, and without wishing to appear absurdly innocent of the corruptions to which political institutions and practices are always prone, I want to work with the following simple (democratic) understanding: *whatever else politics may be about, it's crucially about modes of interaction, organisation and decision-making in which dialogue among citizens and their representatives plays an indispensable role.* The spirit of this understanding traces back to the democratic experience of the ancient Athenians, to which we in the contemporary West remain indebted however much our experiences differ from theirs, and received perhaps its most abiding articulation through the political philosophy of Aristotle. Arguably, Aristotle understood long ago what many in Britain and Ireland have in more recent times contrived

to forget: dialogue matters to the quality of civic life, and its absence endangers the health of any polity.

1.2. A major distraction from politics currently appears in the preoccupation with the "political" issues of decommissioning paramilitary weapons, dismantling paramilitary organisations, ending punishment beatings, and early release of paramilitary prisoners. To clarify, such issues are properly topics of political debate but, in a post-ceasefire situation, are improperly raised as obstacles to debate. This is not to say that it is unreasonable to expect immediate movement on the issues of weapons and beatings in particular; indeed, until such movement occurs there remains justifiable doubt not only about the democratic commitment of parties associated with paramilitary organisations, but also about their grasp of elementary rules of justice. Nonetheless it is to say that, however lamentable it may be, lack of movement shouldn't be allowed to paralyse the process of substantive political talks between parties: (i) because lack of movement reflects a deep-seated mistrust which can't be adequately addressed independently of dialogue; and (ii) because paralysis exacerbates a loss of politics which adversely affects the whole of social and political life.

1.3. Another distraction from politics is inherent in the structures of direct rule and the Anglo-Irish Secretariat. These contribute to an acute "democratic deficit" in Northern Ireland which ought to concentrate political minds much more firmly than it does. The peculiar structures of government here diminish the notion of political responsibility essential to democratic practice: they accord too much power to unaccountable bureaucrats, reduce the

Province's political parties to little more than "bit players", and undermine the functions typically associated with citizenship.

1.4. A third distraction from politics is manifest in the advocacy of unrealistic options for the future of Northern Ireland. These options - which include those of a united Ireland, an independent Ulster, full integration with Britain, and a return to a majority-rule Stormont - often appear in the form of impossible and unreasonable demands which create inflated expectations amongst their adherents and unnecessary fears amongst their opponents. It is precisely these interlocking phenomena of (exaggerated) hope and fear that tend to reduce politics to a zero-sum game and make substantive dialogical interactions between unionists and nationalists more difficult to envisage than they need be.

## 2. THE FOCUS OF POLITICS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

2.1. Mention of this third distraction raises the question of what the proper focus of politics ought to be. An initial response is to say that political debate should have as its central focus enhancement of the quality of social and political life within Northern Ireland as it is currently constituted. The crucial phrase - *Northern Ireland as it is currently constituted* - requires immediate justification. It relies upon two basic premises: (i) that any reasonable answer to the question of focus has to defer to democratic standards and thus cannot avoid conceding that the views of a majority of citizens in a polity cannot be *legitimately* overridden; and (ii) given that a conspicuous majority in Northern Ireland expressly wish to remain part of the United Kingdom that wish

must be respected. Accordingly, I claim that fruitful political dialogue is distinguishable from idle political rhetoric in virtue of its refusal to pursue unrealisable dreams and its insistence on focusing on possibilities that occur within a context where the integrity of Northern Ireland is recognised.

2.2. The foregoing response to the issue of focus reiterates a common unionist line. But it remains seriously understated in several respects and in its present form is problematic. First, it occludes the different connotations unionists associate with a commitment to the integrity of Northern Ireland. Here it confronts the problem of there being more ways than one of describing a position as unionist. Secondly, it leaves utterly vague the meaning of the phrase *enhancing the quality of social and political life*. Here it encounters the problem of appearing vacuous. And, thirdly, it is silent about what space, if any, should be given to accommodating nationalist sentiments. Here it invites the understandable retort that all it offers is another curt denial of the validity of any nationalist stance and so faces the problem of being thoroughly unacceptable to a large number of Northern Ireland's inhabitants. I attempt to fill in the second and third gaps in my response and address the problems they suggest when dealing shortly with the aims of politics. It is to the first gap and the problem it presents that I'd now like to turn. I do so by identifying three sorts of unionist expression, and by explicitly endorsing only one of these.

2.3. To repeat, all three unionist expressions share what I'll now call claim (a): *that the integrity of Northern Ireland must be*

recognised out of deference to the democratic will of its people. One unionist expression at least tacitly adds claim (b): *that the society's institutions and practices should reflect the cultural/religious affiliations of the majority.* The other two unionist expressions reject claim (b) and agree instead on claim (c): *that a Northern Ireland worthy of the allegiance of all its citizens must not be shaped by exclusive cultural attachments.* A second unionist expression gives this claim a particular twist through a further claim (d): *that Northern Ireland should be viewed as an integral part of an inclusive, pluralist British state which respects equally the rights of every individual and tolerates cultural diversity.* A third unionist expression accepts the emphases on rights and diversity in claim (d), but objects that it doesn't reckon seriously enough with the presence of a substantial nationalist minority within Northern Ireland. The assumption seems to be that the benefits of membership of a pluralist state should be sufficient to cure nationalists of their nationalism and turn them into good liberals - which is to say, unionists. In rejecting this assumption, the third form of unionism substitutes claim (d) with claim (e): *in addition to guaranteeing individuals' rights and facilitating cultural diversity within the framework of the British state, a Northern Ireland worthy of everyone's allegiance must find space in its own institutional life for Irishness as well as Britishness.*

2.4. The third expression of unionism, which combines claims (a), (c) and (e), is the one I endorse. Put in other terms, it argues as follows. Northern Ireland shares much in common with Britain and, in virtue of their democratic mandate, unionists are entitled to insist that it remains within the United Kingdom. It also shares

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commonalities with the Irish Republic. But Northern Ireland is different from both and is in an important sense "a place apart". Its apartness is a constant source of friction not least because it is denied by those who like to suppose that it is as "British as Finchley" and by others who imagine that it is as "Irish as Cork". Both denials, though mirroring deeply held beliefs, are little more than first-class fictions which stultify genuine debate. Facing up to Northern Ireland's apartness does not imply an end to friction, but it does introduce the possibility of friction leading to creative outcomes rather than to perpetual stalemates. This possibility requires for its actualisation a devolution of significant powers to Northern Ireland which are shared among different political parties. In sum, an amplification of the initial claim that properly focused politics involves recognition of the integrity of Northern Ireland reveals that the Northern Ireland in question is one in which unionists, nationalists and others must have a meaningful stake. Fruitful dialogue about the future presupposes nothing less.

### 3. THE AIMS OF POLITICS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

3.1. Clarification of the question of focus has defined the kind of unionism I think has most to offer. It has also indicated the sort of space that unionism must be prepared to afford to nationalism, even if more needs to be said about this. Before saying more, however, I want to consider what content can be given to the other claim I made in reference to the question of focus: that politics should be devoted to *enhancing the quality of social and political life* in Northern Ireland. I try to become clearer on this by laying out what I take to be the foremost aim of politics.

3.2. Generally stated, *the chief purpose of politics is to create, protect and sustain a way of life worth having*. Such a way of life is characterised, among other things, by certain sorts of political, legal and socio-economic institutions and practices.

3.3. At a political level, a way of life worth having:

(i) is comprised of institutions and practices with which citizens identify and which command their allegiance;

(ii) is maintained by an active citizenry whose words and deeds are integral to the institutions and practices that define the polity's way of life;

(iii) grants a particularly important role to political institutions - (a) by encouraging forms of political activity which are open to all citizens and by having on centre-stage public representatives who have real power to implement policies beneficial to society and who are subject to usual forms of democratic accountability; and (b) by thus safeguarding a public space which is defined by inclusiveness and dialogue;

(iv) permits the proliferation in civil society of all institutions and practices that express the diversity of individuals, associations and groups - except those entailing a victimisation of others - and so makes central the toleration of difference.

3.4. At a legal level, a way of life worth having:

(i) is constituted by legal and security institutions that are open to applicants of sufficient merit, whatever their



background, are widely recognised as impartial, and therefore are acceptable to all sections of society;

(ii) institutionalises legislation guaranteeing protection of the rights of individuals and groups against discrimination, preferably through a Bill of Rights.

3.5. At a socio-economic level, a way of life worth having:

(i) is distinguished by the presence of institutions geared to providing conditions conducive to the flourishing of all members of society; institutions not left to the mercy of market forces alone but based upon acceptable principles of social justice;

(ii) is defined by structures suited to permit space and scope for the mix of individual/group/company/ government initiatives and investments, especially in areas of acute deprivation, which are crucial to a thriving economy;

(iii) is characterised by the development of specific policies - in such areas as health, education, employment, social benefits, etc. - which are designed (a) to ensure that no persons or groups are systematically discriminated against or forced, through unfortunate circumstances, to fall below certain acceptable standards of living; and (b) to provide for all persons fair access to and a share of society's resources and opportunities.

3.6. A way of life defined by the sort of political, legal and socio-economic institutions and practices tersely outlined above captures in broad terms what I think politics should principally be aiming to achieve. And it gives some indication of how the quality

of social and political life in Northern Ireland may be enhanced. It suggests a vision that is intended to be equally acceptable to those of any persuasion - unionist, nationalist or neither. Within the context of Northern Ireland its point is this: if efforts were concentrated on creating, protecting and sustaining such a way of life or vision new possibilities would open up and old hostilities would be put under severe pressure. Common ground would be discovered by citizens devoted to making Northern Ireland work; new forms of citizen attachment and identity might appear alongside traditional ones. New divisions would also undoubtedly surface, but at least they wouldn't necessarily cut along predictable sectarian lines.

3.7. Current realities, of course, militate against the realisation of anything approximating such a vision and threaten to reduce it to the status of a millenarian dream. Among these realities, the reluctance of nationalists to entertain the prospect of discovering a sense of belonging within Northern Ireland looms as the most obvious challenge to the vision's viability. In turning to address this reluctance, I expand upon my earlier comments (2.3 & 2.4) on nationalists needing to have a stake in the institutional life of Northern Ireland, and subsequent comment (3.3) on citizens requiring institutions with which they may identify. I do so by suggesting that another aim of politics, given the peculiar circumstances of Northern Ireland, *is to indicate how it is feasible to expect nationalists to identify with a polity they disparagingly refer to as "a failed political entity"*. (I should add that in deliberating briefly about this aim, I am not intending to explore the details of the practical arrangements I mention. Such details are beyond the

scope of this submission and are best reserved for negotiation if [or, more optimistically, when] all parties eventually agree to talks. It is sufficient for my purposes to restrict deliberation to broad suggestions and matters of principle.) There are three considerations I want to lay out in an attempt to persuade nationalists that the seemingly unthinkable is in fact quite thinkable.

3.8. The first consideration expands upon the notion of Northern Ireland's "apartness" by suggesting that it implies the possibility of a successful, rather than a failed, political entity. Grasping this possibility involves:

- (i) conceding that partition reflected different attachments of "heart and mind" which separated unionists and nationalists, and wasn't merely an arbitrary British imposition;
- (ii) admitting that the legitimacy of partition can't be undermined by invoking either an abstract criterion of justice, since any such criterion is too abstract to admit of an unambiguous application to the circumstances of Ireland in the first quarter of the twentieth century, or a one-off election result in 1918, since its status isn't sufficiently privileged to trump subsequent elections and government agreements;
- (iii) accepting that, despite official rhetoric, Westminster and Dublin perceive and treat Northern Ireland differently from other parts of Britain and Ireland;
- (iv) acknowledging that under previous unionist rule Northern Ireland provided in significant ways a cultural, social and political environment uncongenial to nationalists;
- (v) also acknowledging that the way in which the Irish state

developed, especially under de Valera, made its cultural, social and political environment uncongenial to unionists;

(vi) recognising that Northern Ireland has undergone patterns of social and political development which have not only highlighted differences between unionists and nationalists, but also created a distinctive stock of common experiences, practices and interests which in part distinguish Northern Ireland's citizens from those in the rest of Britain and in the Republic of Ireland.

(vii) realising that in virtue of their unique history and circumstances, and given a determination not to repeat past mistakes, the people of Northern Ireland have an unrivalled opportunity to reshape their society ( along the lines indicated in 3.3 - 3.6, for example); to exercise a control over their affairs that facilitates the emergence of a Northern Ireland to which everyone can be committed.

3.9. A second consideration takes up the theme of potential nationalist identification with Northern Ireland by submitting that it's appropriate for an Irish dimension to be granted some institutional expression. This is a tricky point which requires careful qualification:

- (i) its basic premise is that an Irish dimension must be accorded institutional recognition if nationalists are to be convinced that Northern Ireland is capable of becoming a polity with which they may identify;
- (ii) any recognition granted must be seen as an end in itself and not as a means to a further end (e.g., a united Ireland);
- (iii) an Irish dimension worthy of institutional recognition

must not be defined by sectarian features which serve only to alienate unionists;

(iv) recognition must be understood not to amount to joint British-Irish sovereignty/authority over Northern Ireland, since this would contravene the democratic wishes of the majority.

3.10. A third consideration gestures at the sort of arrangements capable of accommodating institutional recognition of an Irish dimension. These include a type of power-sharing designed to curb potential unionist excesses, a symbolic expression of Irishness to complement symbolic expressions of Britishness, and various forms of North-South co-operation. To be acceptable, any such arrangements must be worked out against the backdrop of (a) acceptance of Northern Ireland's integrity and difference, and (b) the priority of establishing democratic and just institutions and practices. Accordingly, I suggest that deliberations here should proceed with the following guidelines in mind:

- (i) that attempts to facilitate an Irish dimension should serve the primary goal of creating, protecting and sustaining a democratic and just way of life in Northern Ireland (which, incidentally, is something not properly recognised in *Frameworks for the Future*, as evidenced by the paucity of references they contain confirming Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom, and by their readiness to countenance the implementation of undemocratic structures relieving citizens of control over their own affairs);
- (ii) that a devolved assembly embodying principles of proportionality and weighted majorities, and eventually

enjoying comparable powers to the old Stormont, should be viewed as a worthy goal which promises to nationalists (and others) a meaningful stake in political life;

(iii) that Irish and British symbols, shorn of their exclusive, sectarian connotations, should be permitted expression in an effort to underscore the uniqueness of Northern Ireland and to confirm that it is a society to which all of us can fully belong;

(iv) that, where appropriate in matters of mutual concern, interest, advantage and harmony, North-South bodies should be established, though only with circumscribed powers;

(v) that East-West relationships should also continue to develop - since, beside their economic and political rationale, they help to break down old British-Irish prejudices - but some role should be found within them for a Northern Ireland voice, at least on matters concerning its internal affairs.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. The foregoing analysis has limited its attention to certain political factors which cannot, in my view, be ignored by any serious quest for a resolution of the problems of Northern Ireland. Although not expressly referred to, I hope that the thrust of my remarks touches upon important senses of the terms "peace" and "reconciliation". It has certainly been my intention to clarify political conditions crucial to a meaningful interpretation of these terms.

4.2. I'd like to conclude by underscoring the main theme I've been

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driving at and which I'll re-express as follows: what counts most in the search for durable peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland is an unswerving commitment to build a just and democratic society capable of commanding the allegiance of all citizens. It is in terms of this commitment that the interests and recommendations of the British and Irish governments should be judged, as should those notions of unionism and nationalism which effectively make democracy and justice optional extras. To be committed to creating, protecting and sustaining a social and political way of life worth having in Northern Ireland adds an urgency to our efforts to overcome the sort of distractions from, or impediments to, meaningful politics I've already alluded to (see 1.2 - 1.4). And this faces both governments, all parties and all citizens with responsibilities that are too serious to dodge.