

THE IRA CEASEFIRE, TWELVE MONTHS ON

extracts of an address by

Alliance Party Leader, Dr John Alderdice

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One year on, some of those who felt most excitement at the IRA ceasefire, seem depressed by the current stand-off. However, if you think the peace process is in crisis now, then it has been in crisis from the start. Early arguments over the semantics of its 'permanence' or 'completeness', were just indications of the difficulties to be faced all along the way. In reality, the prospects are by no means gloomy. The settlement of an ancient feud is never achieved without a prolonged, sometimes tortuous, process, and we should not underestimate the progress that has been made.

Some nationalist politicians regard pressure on de-commissioning of IRA weapons as premature, but see moves on prisoners and all-party talks, as unduly delayed. Meanwhile the unionist parties are angry about current British Government talks with Sinn Fein and the recently announced moves on prisoners, in advance of the de-commissioning of weapons. All sides see the political developments of the last year as both too rapid and also paradoxically, not quick enough. For ordinary people, relief that both republican and loyalist terrorist campaigns have ended, is tempered by anxiety about the underlying threat of a resumption. Street confrontations and sectarian attacks on people and property, are worryingly reminiscent of the way the troubles began, and there is evidence that social and psychological difficulties from the troubles years, are emerging as a form of negative peace dividend. No-one is entirely at ease. We all know that a cessation of hostilities is not the same thing as a permanent peace, much less an agreed settlement.

In looking at some of the hurdles which lie in our way in reaching that settlement, it would be presumptuous of me to speak here, in the company of such distinguished nationalist leaders, about how nationalists see the situation, but perhaps it may be of some help if I say a few words about why I think unionists have responded more slowly, and will continue to respond to the peace process more slowly, than nationalists might hope or expect. I do this because I think that there is deep distrust, suspicion and misunderstanding around, and I think we must all do what we can to reduce that distrust, through better understanding of those we know least. If unionists feel that I also misunderstand and misrepresent them, I am sure that they will speedily correct me when I return home.

Firstly it must be recognized that unionists see nationalist talk of progress, as referring to a dynamic that always moves away from the preferred unionist position. Partition was the historic compromise as far as unionists were concerned, and any attempt to review the question is seen in itself as bad faith. While nationalists may espouse a vision of a hoped for future United Ireland, there is no equivalent unionist vision, but only a wish to hold on for as long as possible to the current constitutional position. Nationalists meanwhile have completely failed to persuade unionists that the vision they hold is truly one that can be shared with protestant unionist people. On the contrary the IRA terrorist campaign which has left so many unionist families broken and bereaved has deepened still further the bitter divisions which had in any case blighted the relationships between the people of this island for so long. The depth of the hurt caused by that campaign should not be underestimated, and should surely be understood in this state. The vestiges of animosity created by a brief civil war here in the the 1920's have taken generations to resolve. How much more work needs to be done to heal the injuries of twenty-five years of death, injury and destruction in Northern Ireland.

In political terms however, the peace process itself provokes a deep distrust within unionists. The achievement of the ceasefire, is spoken of in the nationalist community as though it addressed unionist concerns. It did not. In many ways it deepened them. Yes, they IRA was no longer killing them, but what were going to be the other costs? Let me paint the picture as I believe many unionists see it.

The Talks in 1991/2 were abandoned without any real progress despite the preparedness of unionists to

negotiate with the Dublin Government at meetings in London, Belfast, and even in Dublin itself. That Inter-Party Talks Process was then set to the side in favour of talks within nationalism, and the suspicion arises that there is an attempt to muster all the forces of Irish Nationalism, here and abroad, to force the British Government to abandon the unionists, and cajole, deceive, and force them into a United Ireland, probably through an interim joint authority.

The talks between John Hume and Gerry Adams are seen in this light, and the Joint Declaration signed in Downing Street in December 1993 is also viewed in this context. Nevertheless the Ulster Unionist Party at least gave that agreement a fair wind, as providing a prospect of a renewed process of negotiations with nationalism. Instead of responding however to this unionist olive branch, nationalism waited month after month for the Sinn Fein response. In other words there was no real interest in the unionist position. Even when Sinn Fein refused to accept the Declaration, and this is I understand, still the position, this did not stand in the way of a de facto cooperation within nationalism. The ceasefire, and all the negotiations leading up to it are therefore not seen as an attempt to make peace with unionists, but within nationalism, in order, as unionists see it, to increase the pressure on them. Current calls for all-party talks are seen in this light.

In simple terms then, for many unionists the peace process to date is not seen as addressing the fundamental division between Irish Unionists and Irish Nationalists, but as trying to heal the division between constitutional nationalism and physical force republicanism. In this way they do not accept the proposition that peace threatens no-one, for they see the peace that is really being created as peace only within nationalism, whose purpose is to increase the pressure on the unionist position. Why, they ask, is it easier for the SDLP to work with Sinn Fein, with whom they disagree fundamentally on the Downing Street Declaration, and historically on the use of violence, when, as they see it, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party do at least both accept the Declaration and reject absolutely the use to political violence. Surely the only possible answer, say they, is that blood is thicker than water. This of course undermines the value of political agreements, for, as unionists see it, if their acceptance of the Joint Declaration was of less value than Sinn Fein's rejection of it, what will be the worth of any future attempt at reaching a political agreement.

I paint this picture of the position of how I believe unionists see the situation, as I painted for them in the Ulster Hall some weeks ago, a picture of why they had to change so as to understand and respond to nationalist concerns, because I believe that without a genuine attempt to understand and respond with honesty to each others concerns we will not achieve an honourable settlement. I do so also to help you understand the negative response which there has been to calls from nationalist leaders for round-table talks. The frustration, after a year of ceasefire, which has led to these calls is very understandable, but without progress on de-commissioning the paramilitary arsenal, the unionists will not participate in a round-table conference. I hope that you will understand too how such calls are simply seen as attempts to further corner unionists, and cornering the unionists is not the way to reach a settlement, any more than cornering nationalists would be.

Does this mean that we are completely blocked. I think not. In my own meetings with all the other parties during the past year I have found that no-one was refusing to talk at all. Everyone was seized of the importance of building peace. This gives me real hope.

There is much that both unionists and nationalists can do to help build trust, and assist the process. On the nationalist side, the fact that hundreds of British soldiers have now been withdrawn from Northern Ireland, effectively de-commissions those weapons. Surely the IRA could meet the British Government 'toe to toe' on this and move towards some action on the weapons. This would

undoubtedly lead to more British soldiers being able to be withdrawn from service in Northern Ireland. On the unionist side much could be done to make Orange marches less offensive, to facilitate Irish culture, and a much more positive approach could be taken to the ceasefires, and the peace process itself. This would increase nationalist trust in the process.

But it is also reasonable for us to look to the two governments for a lead, at their up-coming summit. The British and Irish Governments must work together to inject new life into the network of discussions which involves all the parties, through a much more energetic programme of bilateral meetings. I believe that for most people in Northern Ireland, if the British Government is meeting and talking with Sinn Fein, they make little distinction as to whether these are talks, substantive talks, or negotiations. Most people simply say, 'If they are talking, I hope that they are using their time to do something useful, honourable and constructive.' I myself see no difficulty in the British Government addressing in their talks with Sinn Fein, key issues such as the principle of consent and the future of Northern Ireland, and North-South relations. If this were to happen surely the whole process would have moved forward.

At the same time, we must be clear that the issue of de-commissioning, as it has become known, will not go away. That is why I have recently reiterated publicly the proposal I made to British Prime Minister, Mr Major at a meeting in Downing Street in September last year, for the establishment, in cooperation with the Irish Government, of a task force on de-commissioning weapons from both sides. This proposal should now be actioned with urgency, and the two governments should welcome international participation in such a project. There is on the table the offer of expertise, experience, and assistance from a friendly government, and that should now be accepted. I am much encouraged that Sinn Fein has not ruled out cooperation with such a body, depending of course on its precise terms, and I am optimistic that such a body could win wide acceptance for its work.

This parallel treatment of the political and arms issues is, I am convinced the best way of dealing with the current hurdle.

Finally, we must understand, that no matter how successfully we overcome the current obstacles, there will be almost continual crises until we reach a settlement, and perhaps even beyond. These should challenge our imagination and acumen, not our commitment to the process. There is no need to betray the future, because of our fears of the past, or the problems of the present.