

ON THE REVIEW OF THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT

The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement marked the end of the road for the old oppressive unionism which had passed for politics here for over sixty years. The signatories were clearly saying that there was no going back to the discrimination and one-party rule of a dominion status Stormont. But it also clearly indicated that the neo-imperialism of those republicans who wanted to take over an unwilling pro-union majority by force was forever doomed to self-destructive defeat. In both these senses it was the end of two old anachronistic worlds.

Unfortunately the secretive undemocratic way in which the agreement emerged and the inadequacies of its content have meant that it has failed to deliver on its laudable stated aims, of peace, stability and reconciliation. It has not proved to be the bearer of better times, and in this sense has been a disappointment to many of its erstwhile enthusiasts. However the inclusion within the Agreement of a Review mechanism gives an opportunity to build upon the experience of the past three years, and although not all constitutional politicians will agree to be directly involved, there is a very real opportunity for improvements in the agreement and in the political situation, during the period of the review.

The merits of a transnational forum have long been appreciated by the people of Scandinavia. Their Nordic Council has enabled the separate peoples of the region to reach a level of understanding, respect and cooperation that would have seemed utterly impossible during their three hundred years of wars up until the early nineteenth century. Since 1952 the growth of this council, to express the unique relationships of the Scandinavian peoples, has been evolutionary. Attempts at dramatic initiatives have resulted in failure but gradual, almost piecemeal development has facilitated and reflected increased legal, social, economic and cultural cooperation, without affecting the sovereignty of the nations involved. This sovereignty is precious to them since Finland had only won independence in 1917, Iceland had been part of Denmark until 1918, and Norway had at different times been governed by both Denmark and Sweden. The relationship between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom comes readily to mind. To carry the comparison further, in 1921, when Ireland was in bloody conflict, the dispute between Sweden and Finland over the Aland Islands was settled peacefully.

The question could readily be asked, "At this time of Review of the Anglo-Irish Conference, can we learn anything from the Nordic experience which would help us to improve its function and facilitate the harmonious and constructive development of the very singular network of relationships of the peoples of these islands?"

One crucial problem about the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement was that it gave no facility for direct input, at the highest level, from the representatives of the people of Northern Ireland. This led to accusations of lack of democracy and secretiveness, and a wish amongst unionists to destroy the possibility of Anglo-Irish cooperation rather than contribute to it. I see no reason why the Anglo-Irish Conference should not be able, in the event of devolution, to have representatives of the British Government, the Irish Government, and also of a Devolved Government of Northern Ireland, all sitting together at a Tri-Partite Conference table. Each would have differing responsibilities and powers, but the Nordic Council has managed to cope with this kind of matter, since it includes not only sovereign nations like Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, but also dependent territories such as the Aland Islands and Greenland.

The advantages of such an arrangement could be enormous. It would ensure a direct and informed input from the people of Northern Ireland. It would facilitate the building up of practical expressions of the much quoted 'totality of relationships'. It would meet the criticism that unionists are excluded from the administration of their own province. It would obviate the problem of secrecy. And by giving Northern Ireland's politicians a position of respect and responsibility it would offer them a real incentive to act responsibly and constructively. In offering all of this it would in no way compromise the advantages which have been achieved to date.

For this proposal or any other similar proposal to be of value it must be agreed by all the parties to the problem, and such agreement cannot come about without dialogue. Inter-party talks are therefore the first step to any agreement. This particular proposal is also dependent on movement towards devolution, but I am now more than ever convinced that without partnership devolution there is little possibility of any real progress within Northern Ireland, and no hope of the period of the review fulfilling its opportunity of political advancement.

I sense a widespread wish amongst our people to find a way in which we can share this province and these Western European islands. It is for the people to ensure that their politicians respect and represent that wish for talks and for a genuine accommodation all round. The time of the Review may be our best chance for many years. If it is lost, it may also be the last chance for many years.

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