

NATION STATES AND MINORITIES

a speech delivered by

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We meet together today bringing both the elements of a shared vision of the New Europe, and also our own domestic experiences and concerns. But on this day in particular we await with undisguised interest the outcome of the presidential election in the United States of America. The result, of what is almost certainly the most expensive exercise of political democracy in the history of mankind, will affect all of us in one way or another. I draw your attention to this event because, whilst as Europeans we often look to the French Revolution as the key event in the development of liberal democracy, there is a strong argument that it was the American Revolution which laid down the principles of participatory democracy as we know them, and, as we await the outcome of this recent and quite extraordinary presidential campaign, we should reflect on the values and shortcomings of that political system which is itself struggling with the problems of minority rights.

Firstly, of course, the mantle of power and leadership is passed on, not by the law of primogeniture or by brute force, but by the securing of an electoral mandate given by the people. But this was not the only advance that the American Revolution brought. The separation of the powers of the executive and the legislature as a check on the untrammelled authority of the Chief Executive, and the incorporation of a

Bill of Rights into the Constitution were major steps whose implications, dilemmas and democratic opportunities continue to be investigated. What this all achieved was the movement away from dictatorship towards democracy, and as such it was driven by the spirit of freedom and justice which is the banner of liberalism, and the driving force behind all real political progress. Of course it was at that time only a participatory democracy for some, and it is only in our own generation that the principle of universal adult suffrage was finally achieved. These vital developments have moved the exclusive exercise of authority away from powerful individuals, families, and oligarchies, holding their position by birth, or by brute force, and have enabled the mass of ordinary people to participate in their own governance.

I believe that it is now time for liberals to go much further in their understanding of what democracy is about and I have been forced to this conclusion by my experience of politics in Northern Ireland. Let me try to outline why I believe that the issue of minorities must be the focus of our attention, but first I must say something of the Northern Ireland situation.

For many hundreds of years the peoples of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland have been ruled by a monarchy which has become increasingly democratized by the strengthening of the powers of the elected house of the parliament. At the end of

the last century, however, there were many features (and this is still to some extent the case) which accord to the English people and their religious, cultural and power interests, an overwhelming influence in the affairs of the whole Kingdom. Ireland was particularly poorly treated, especially those parts of the island with a predominately Roman Catholic population. In the 1920's, after a violent uprising, the island of Ireland was partitioned and 26 of the counties seceded from the United Kingdom and formed an independent republic with a strongly, conservative Catholic constitution and culture.

The 6 north-eastern counties which had a majority Protestant population and a deep and long-standing religious and cultural attachment to Scotland, chose to remain within the United Kingdom as the newly created entity of Northern Ireland.

In the South, there was a rapid exodus of most of the Protestant minority, leaving, after a few years, an almost entirely Catholic population. In Northern Ireland, the majority Protestant population, shaken by these cataclysmic events, and fearful that they would be forced to leave the United Kingdom at some future date, used their position of overwhelming numbers to run the parliamentary system so that housing, the economy, policing and most of the social order of the province was entirely under the control of, and for the benefit of, Protestant Unionists. This led to a complete

alienation of Catholics from the state and at times even to a total boycott of the parliamentary system.

Now, whilst thankfully in most societies things do not become quite so polarized as in Northern Ireland, there is an important principle here which is applicable everywhere. Dictatorship is unacceptable to a liberal because we do not believe that through birth or brute force any human being has the right to exercise authority over others. Legitimacy of authority is conferred only through the willing consent of an electorate, expressing that preference and consent regularly, freely and fairly. But, we must now ask, what is the position, even in such a democracy, of a permanent minority? A dictatorship of the majority may be just as oppressive for the individuals concerned as many more obviously undemocratic systems.

The central principle of liberalism is that society must order itself so that each individual is enabled to hold to his own views, to live his own life, and to seek to fulfil his own potential in relation with others. But this principle is not fulfilled if it is only possible for the few, or even for the majority. If it is not fulfilled for all, then it is not fulfilled. In Northern Ireland this principle was hardly fulfilled in the past for many poor Protestants, but it was

certainly not fulfilled at all for the vast majority of Roman Catholics.

The hope in partitioning the island had been that it would create relatively homogenous communities, north and south of the border. In so many places we have seen this principle applied. Battles have been fought and political struggles have been waged to establish frontier which include within their boundaries all those who feel themselves to be part of a community. Back of this is the spirit of nationalism. Unlike liberalism which regards all humankind as brothers or sisters, nationalism wants to ensure that "within our borders we have all of our people. Outside are the foreigners - and if they are not outside then they ought to be!"

There is nothing wrong with a sense of local pride, or regional identity, or common national heritage and kinship, and even of full-hearted patriotism. These are natural and noble things. Without them we would be less human, and our cultural and social life would be impoverished.

As with religious belief, it is not adherence to convictions, but an insistence that everyone else must adhere to my convictions, and live their lives according to my rules that is the root of fundamentalism, with all its prejudice, intolerance and inhumanity. So too with nationalism, it is the insistence

that difference must be recognised by division, rather than by pluralism which is the terrible danger.

It is impossible to draw boundaries which ensure homogenous communities. And even if it were more possible in the past, the explosion of travel and communication which this century has brought will ensure that it is even more impossible in the future. No matter where we draw frontiers we include within them those who have a different language or religion or ethnic background. We include these who dissent from the majority view, or those who value a cultural tradition which sets them apart. And this is the way it should be. We are enriched by such minorities and while we should never cease to value the majority of citizens, we improvish ourselves, intellectually and culturally, if we insist on a ghastly homogenous mediocrity.

Healthy liberal communities must value all minorities, and their removal or subjugation is the mark of fundamentalism and authoritarianism, and is one of the great dangers for the New Europe. The creation of borders - and I am aware of the significance of what I am saying for the people of this great city of Prague - the creation of borders, or indeed within the European Community the mere removal of borders, as a means of addressing the problems of minorities is a dangerous illusion, not a solution.

In Northern Ireland the problems became so serious that in the late 1960's violence broke out. Initially this was a reaction from hard-line Protestants to belated improvements in civil rights for Catholics. These so-called loyalists were afraid that the minority would over-run them. This initial violence provoked a response and a terrorist campaign began which met with counter-reactions, and the whole community descended into the political disarray and violence from which 25 years later it has not yet emerged.

So far I think that we can establish three principles from the Northern Ireland experience. Firstly, majoritarian government is not a sufficient basis for liberal democracy in our increasingly diverse communities. Secondly, minorities, because of education, mass communication, and a change in the political culture, are much less prepared to accept a disadvantaged position, in society. Thirdly, failure to address the problem of minorities early enough, or adequately enough, may lead to violence, and counter-violence, and once violence enters into the situation it creates its own dreadful and very enduring dynamic.

Four major initiatives have been attempted in Northern Ireland, since the violence erupted in 1968.

In 1974 a Power-sharing system was set up, which gave three major parties a share in government together - the Unionist Party, which was exclusively Protestant, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, which was almost exclusively Catholic and Nationalist, and the Alliance Party (of which I am the current leader) which has significant numbers of both Protestants and Catholics. This experiment collapsed within 6 months, not through internal stresses, but in the face of a massive violent strike by Protestant workers and paramilitaries opposed to the compromise. Since that time, no Northern Ireland politicians have held any power in the province, which is directly governed from London by appointed ministers.

The second initiative has been the implementation through these ministers by the Westminster government of a series of measures designed to ensure equality of opportunity for the minority.

Fair employment legislation has made religious discrimination a criminal offence, and more recently employers have been required to monitor the religious composition of their workforce, and introduce changes in their advertising, interviewing and employment practices. Housing allocation has been removed from political control. Economic initiatives have targeted Catholic areas of deprivation, and the structure, control and actions of the security forces have been rigorously revised and

independent monitoring and complaints procedures introduced for all aspects of public life.

These measures now provide a considerable defence of protection for the Catholic minority, and indeed for Protestant minorities in Catholic areas.

The educational system which had become completely divided, with protestants controlling state education, and the Catholic Church controlling the separate education of its children, is now being influenced by the welcome emergence of a small number of Integrated Schools with both protestant and catholic children attending. There is also a government programme of Education for Mutual Understanding which brings together children from different schools across the religious divide. There is an increasing recognition of the Irish language, though its use as a medium is very limited even in Catholic Schools.

These reforms, combined with economic development initiatives have brought major improvements in the welfare of, and opportunities available to, the Catholic minority however they have not healed the divisions in our community. In retrospect I think that this is partly because the absence of a local democratic structure since 1974 has made Protestant people feel that the changes are an imposition, while Catholics see them as

having come too slowly and belatedly over a twenty-year period. Protestants are further dismayed that despite these changes there is no greater sense of allegiance to the state from Nationalists.

The third initiative, which was designed to tackle this question of allegiance was the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. This far-reaching accord between the British and Irish Governments created a monthly Inter-Governmental Conference of Ministers from London and Dublin, and a full time Anglo-Irish Secretariat. It was brought about with no consultation with Unionists or Alliance, but only with the Nationalists, and created a massively negative response from the Protestant population, with street protests, political boycott and an increasing rate of murders of Catholics by Protestant terrorists.

The fourth initiative, whose purpose has been to draw together of all these elements of, political restructuring, the elimination of social and economic discrimination, and the question of allegiance, is the current Talks Process which involves the British and Irish Governments and the four democratic Northern Ireland parties (DUP, UUP, Alliance and SDLP). These talks have now been going on for some time for two or three years and very intensively, three or four days each week for the past six months. They are likely to end this

day next week, and at this point there is very serious doubt that agreement can be reached. The Unionists have belatedly produced some real compromise proposals, but the Nationalists, as represented by the Social Democratic and Labour Party are now in such a beneficial and strong position that they no longer feel the need to make any compromises at all.

It will be clear to you from this synopsis that I am in no position to offer solutions to the problem of minorities in a nation-state, for the problem of Northern Ireland is some way from being solved, however I can draw out some more principles.

I have already mentioned three:

1. That majoritarianism is not acceptable in a divided community
2. That minorities are increasingly unprepared to accept the suppression of their rights.
3. That unresolved minority problems can break down into violence, which then takes on a whole life of its own.

To these I would now add several others.

4. From a practical point of view there is much to be said for moving fairly quickly with a package of reforms, to protect minorities. Of course if one moves too quickly it may provoke a reaction but if it is done too slowly the impact on a disenchanted minority may be dissipated and impatience may undermine some of the benefits. There is now a well tested battery of social and economic measures in employment, housing, education, protection of civil liberties, language rights, the administration of justice, policing and helping areas of deprivation. These can be set alongside political and constitutional measures, such as proportional representation, weighted majority requirements, proportionate government, bills of rights, and external referral mechanisms of appeal. It is vital that communities move towards the acceptance and implementation of such measures for the protection of minorities before violence intervenes. The difficulty is not how what measures one can introduce but the political strategy to be employed to ensure their successful introduction.

5. Whatever strategies are employed it is very dangerous to subvert or destroy democratic structures as part of this process. Democracy can be a difficult process, but it is better than the alternatives.

6. Finally we must take great care not to demonize and reject anyone. There is a tendency to demonize minorities and to

justify their oppression with suitable myths. But there can also be a demonizing of the majority, and I fear that in Northern Ireland the Unionists have now been demonized by the outside world, and even by the people of Britain, and are being turned into an oppressed minority. They can now do no right, and the constitutional nationalists (as distinct from Sinn Fein Nationalists who support the IRA) can do no wrong, and this is making a solution just as impossible as when the roles were reversed.

In addressing the problems of minorities we must seek to value everyone and demonize no-one. There are no good nations, and no bad nations. But there are good, and indeed better ways of relating to each other than we have at present, and it is our liberal commitment to better relations with all our fellows, which gives political hope in all our communities, to all our people, whether in the majorities or in the minorities.