

# **Redefining Unionism - A Political Perspective**

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### **I**

When I agreed to contribute to this lecture series my mind turned to a song from that famous musical *Les Miserables* - a musical I have seen both in London and here at The Point. In one scene the star of the musical, Jean Val Jean, asks in song “Who am I?” One telling line is “If I speak I am condemned, if I stay silent I am damned.” Too often the easy road is to say nothing. Indeed I have often been asked, why are you in politics? My answer is simple - I enjoy politics. But as often as I am asked that question I am told what I should do - “don’t give in”, “stand firm”, “you live in history, think of the future” - to name but a few words of advice.

However, it is more than enjoyment – there must be hope for a better future for all. We cannot subscribe to that phrase of Oscar Wilde, “Something was dead in all of us and what was dead was hope.” Not so indeed, Unionism has come a long way over the past decades. It is the following questions that I have been asked to address today: What has been the traditional position of the Ulster Unionist Party? What reasons have there been for change? What main changes have there been in recent years? And finally, what are the implications for relations within these islands?

### **II**

The initial Ulster Unionist Party position before 1920 (properly called the Ulster Unionist Council) - we are not officially a political party, now there is an ‘Irishism’ for you! - had been to reject any form of devolved (or self) government. However, the Northern Ireland parliament (Stormont) became in due course, as viewed by unionists, a bulwark for the Union - even though it was accepted by unionists at the outset that Northern Ireland was being marginalised from mainstream politics. Also, some non-unionists hoped that the separate parliament would lead to a united Ireland.

Unionists therefore sought for many years the return of a parliament, which, in their view, had been unfairly removed in March 1972. From that time there was much debate within Unionism as to the best way forward - devolution/integration, majority rule/power sharing. Such continued debate had been to the detriment of the Unionist case and it could be contested, with some justification, that for many years since 1972 Unionism had not a clear and focused policy, argued with consistency, conviction and clarity, to match the case presented by nationalists.

Nationalists’ position seemed clear. In 1978 the SDLP document *Facing Reality* stated:

... the British Government should enter into immediate discussion with the Irish Government in order to promote jointly matters of common concern to

both parts of Ireland. They should also develop jointly a programme for the harmonisation of the laws and services on both sides of the border.

The 'Devolution/Integration' debate had been a very divisive issue within Unionism. In reality however these words lack precision. Any form of government below the Westminster level is devolved government. Equally, within certain parameters, there is no one unique form of government called 'integration'. Essentially the difference between the two views, when used in the political debate, refers to whether or not an elected body at Stormont should or should not have the authority to make some of its own laws as Stormont had between 1921 and 1972.

It is worth noting that the Government of Ireland Act (1920) gave no guarantee that Stormont would have the finance available to provide services comparable with Great Britain. At the time of the Home Rule Bills it was estimated that there would be a financial surplus of income over expenditure of £5.7m and £1.9m for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland respectively. Northern Ireland's predicted surplus in reality was a deficit and public provision in general fell below GB standards, not because the Ulsterman was conservative but because the government was chronically short of money. Unionism believed, however, that the political gains of self-government more than outweighed any financial constraint.

In the 1970s and 1980s what were the perceptions? Certainly Unionist policy has always been aimed at securing and enhancing the Union. It was broadly accepted that social disobedience or a 'unionist' terrorist campaign would not preserve the Union and thus clear policies were essential that would be reasonable, achievable, believable and convincing. It had not been a rarity for unionists to say: "we're finished", "we've been sold down the river", or "you're not worth voting for".

Throughout the period 1974-1995 there had been at least eight significant attempts to restore accountable democracy in Northern Ireland. These ranged from the Power Sharing Executive of 1974 (headed by the late Brian Faulkner) to the *Frameworks Document* of 1995. Though most Ulster Unionist Party leaders during this period were called "Traitor" by some, I believe each leader did his best given the circumstances; on each occasion the package was rejected by some grouping - governments, nationalists or unionists; and on each occasion unionism was worse off next time.

An indication of thinking in the 1970's and 1980's can be obtained from the following quotes from leading politicians of the day.

It would be improper and highly dangerous to our case for any party member to suggest or volunteer or hint at any deviation from or amendment to the main principles of our scheme ..... and these do not include administrative devolution, a single elected regional council as an upper tier of local government or total integration.

The number one policy in our books is the return of a devolved government to Northern Ireland. Yes indeed, we are looking for the big one here. We must insist that the devolved government that was taken away from us several years ago be given back to us.

The obvious alternative is a strong devolved government based on the principles of democracy and majority rule. Such a development would be a hammer blow to the morale of the IRA.

These unionist politicians shall remain anonymous, but none is active now in politics.

### III

Unionism in 1987 began to recognise that new thinking was needed. A document entitled 'An End to Drift' was published in June 1987. This was prepared by a unionist cross-party group and presented to both Mr Molyneaux and Dr. Paisley. It contemplated that unionists should not be "ashamed to adapt to changing circumstances" and that both parties perhaps abandon "pure majority rule". This represented new thinking.

Remember, this was against a recent background of not only a boycott of elected institutions by unionists but also various petitions - retention of the Governor, rejection of the Anglo Irish Agreement - and, all unionist MP's resigning their seats and fighting by-elections. Over 400,000 votes returned the unionist MP's to Westminster on an anti Anglo-Irish Agreement "ticket" - a substantial number in the context of Northern Ireland. From a unionist perspective, none of these actions had any measurable impact on the situation.

From a personal viewpoint I can accept that all these proposals by the Government for the governance of Northern Ireland required agreement among the participating parties (including unionists). However when considering the merits of any new proposal one doesn't make a judgement in favour simply because it requires one's approval. A judgement is made in the context of a proposal in the 'up and running' mode. To make clear my point, when purchasing a car the decision is made on how the car performs, not on the fact that the purchase will only take place by agreement between the buyer and seller. In short it was absolutely irrelevant that at regular intervals throughout the 1995 *Frameworks Document*, it was stated that agreement by all parties was needed as if to make the proposals somehow more acceptable to unionists.

Entering the 1990's, as unionism was rethinking its strategy, other events - on a grander scale - were impacting upon the thought process. Indeed, the world is ever changing and the world is never without problems to solve - Northern Ireland is not alone in this context. In this ever-changing world there are from time to time new paradigms. One such paradigm, I believe, was the break up in 1989 of the USSR. You may wonder, why is this mentioned? A major result of this break up was that the threat to peace and stability within Europe became more intra-State than inter-State. The major governments in Europe turned anew to the problem of accommodating diversity within States. The last time this had been addressed had been before 1939.

Intra-State conflict within the European context is additional to other problems such as the transition from totalitarianism to pluralist democracy and the social and economic move from centrally planned economies to market economies.

The solution of intra-State conflict has often been referred to as ‘group accommodation’ or ‘minority protection’. Indeed, a former senior member of the SDLP, Mr Austin Currie - now a member of Dail Eireann - had described our problem in this context as follows:

Fundamentally the Northern Ireland conundrum is one of conflicting national identities between those who believe themselves Irish and those who believe themselves British. There are religious, social, cultural, political and other dimensions to the problem but they are only dimensions of that central issue.

#### IV

Further, my opponents have also defined the problem in the context of ‘Rights’ and ‘Equality’. Pat Doherty, Sinn Fein Vice-President, writing in *Belfast Telegraph* 25<sup>th</sup> February 2000, stated that:

Probably more significantly is the lack of product on the human rights front. While the Human Rights Commission has been established, none of the many obligations in the Agreement has been honoured. We have yet to produce and ratify a Bill of Rights. We have yet to incorporate the European Convention of Human Rights into local law.

I believe this represents a position constantly adopted by Sinn Fein, namely an expressed concern regarding the ‘rights’ (or perceived lack of ‘rights’) of the nationalist/republican community.

I, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, fully agree ‘rights’ should be protected. The basic requirements for order in any democratic society today are found within international Human Rights law. In the context of Northern Ireland there is no more important issue to be addressed than how we organise our society with respect to human rights.

The protection of rights is a central part in the establishment and functioning of democracy. International standards of human rights go to the very heart of democratic values. Failure to abide by these universally accepted human rights standards within a State brings into question whether or not that State is democratic. Mr Ahern referred in an *Irish Times* article on Tuesday of this week, in reference to the present problem of asylum seekers, to his Government’s obligations to international human rights standards.

These rights embrace a number of categories: civil, political, economic, social, religious and cultural. The question has been how can we manage the differences that exist in Northern Ireland in ways consistent with democratic values and human rights.

This commitment to human rights reflects much more than a personal obligation on my part; it should be an obligation on all involved to subscribe to international human rights norms. The Irish government, in the 1990’s, convened a ‘Forum for Peace and reconciliation’. Like similar fora elsewhere, this Forum heard evidence and commissioned studies.

Professors' Kevin Boyle, Colm Campbell and Tom Hadden wrote for the Forum in May 1996 the following:

Decisions on what should constitute fundamental human rights can no longer be regarded as a matter for people in individual States to decide as best they can. The substance of fundamental human rights is now determined by international consensus.

The first mentioned academic was a leading civil rights activist in Northern Ireland in the 1960's.

A clear framework such as that found today within international human rights law provides a coherent approach that should give a consistent thread to both words and deeds by both unionists and nationalists/republicans. Without such a clear framework policy could veer first one way and then an other. I am happy to redefine Unionism in a rights/equality framework.

In trying to redefine unionism an understanding of the word "minority" is required. I remember very well during the Talks process the first time that I mentioned "minority rights". I was abruptly told by Mark Durkan that, and I quote, "I don't ever again want to hear you use the word minority in these Talks when you are referring to Nationalists."

I have learned to understand the word 'minority' carries with it an implication of being somewhat less in importance. The Council of Europe is the foremost organisation regarding the implementation of human rights – it is responsible for the European Court of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Council has referred to a national minority as a group of persons within a State "who display distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics" and are "motivated by a concern to preserve together that which constitutes their common identity." Such a national minority is to be "sufficiently representative, although smaller in number than the rest of the population of that State or a region of that State." This reflects more truly - and sensitively - my concept of a minority; merely smaller in number than other groupings within a State.

Dr. Michael Breisky, the Austrian Ambassador to Ireland, gave a lecture in October 1998 at Queens entitled "Dealing with Minorities: A Challenge for Europe". He was very clear on this point. While it is necessary, as a first element, that minorities are protected by the norms of international rules, a second and equally important element, requires the breaking down of psychological barriers: the sense of superiority/inferiority must be eliminated. The building of confidence and trust is required.

## V

I appreciate that unionists must convince nationalists/republicans that there will be a fair deal for all within Northern Ireland - that they have a stake in Northern Ireland and can play an important role at each level of government. Equally Unionists must

be convinced that all will work within the institutions of government in Northern Ireland - in the context of a peaceful environment. This is where real confidence building is required.

It goes without saying that others, in addition to unionism, need to redefine their thinking. I believe that part of the inherent past difficulty was the way previous United Kingdom, and Irish, Governments approached a resolution to our divided society. It was based on a belief that they faced a unique problem. In February 1995, the *Frameworks Document* described Northern Ireland as being in a “special position”. The then Prime Minister, John Major, described Northern Ireland in the foreword as “unique”.

The assertion that the central problem in Northern Ireland is unique is not based on objective judgement: there are perhaps a hundred million people across Europe who consider themselves to be on the wrong side of a border. Whether it be Russians in Estonia, Hungarians in Slovakia, Austrians in Italy, or for that matter Muslims in the Philippines - to name but some examples - the dynamics of community division are the same and thus subject equally to international human rights standards.

I believe that in fully supporting the Belfast Agreement we have at last correctly defined and reflected the concept of “the totality of relationships” as was stated in the various communiqués issued by Mr Haughey and Mrs Thatcher in 1980. There is more in common between the two main islands than there is in division between us. We use the same first language, are joint heirs to a rich Anglo-Irish culture, share many customs and practices, are accessed by the same media, drive on the same side of the road and have a similar climate which impacts upon many aspects of life. The Belfast Agreement reflects both political and geographic reality. It reflects also best international practice - in a maximalist way - for accommodating diversity.

The Ulster Unionist Party gave absolutely its commitment to create an inclusive government - unionist, nationalist and republican - for Northern Ireland. That Executive was created in December 1999. For confidence to develop and the process to continue, Unionism’s commitment needed to have been matched by a commitment from the Republican movement regarding a complete end to all violence.

This unprecedented commitment to inclusiveness had in my view been too little acknowledged. The inclusiveness was of course built into the Belfast Agreement to which my colleagues and I agreed as a settlement of Northern Ireland’s longstanding conflict. Yet our commitment to inclusivity had not been enough to receive a matching commitment concerning an end to violence. Sinn Fein insisted that it be let into government without any certainty or clarity that decommissioning would take place.

Indeed there seems little understanding that without matching commitments made and honoured by the republican movement after so many months, unionists would naturally lose faith with its intentions and come to fear that the republican game plan was not peace and stability in Northern Ireland.

I have to say that those of us involved closely in the process were disappointed, to put it mildly, at the overt support by the Irish Government for the ‘spin’ adopted by Sinn

Fein. A *Sunday Independent* article on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2000, written by John A. Murphy, summarises well the Ulster Unionist perception. It commenced: “De Valera would be alarmed at the propaganda boost Sinn Fein is getting from Fianna Fail.”

In a much more disturbing vein, I give you a quotation from the *Sunday Business Post* of 26<sup>th</sup> March 2000. In this paper columnist Tom McGurk wrote:

For 30 years now we have tried every conceivable political and constitutional arrangement to retain the linkage with Britain in order to placate them. Not only constitutional nationalism but even republicanism has turned itself inside out in ever more radical attempts to show them a face they might accept. But the answer again and again is no.

I am honestly at times left wondering. For all the millions of words written and spoken on the Northern Ireland problem the gulf in comprehension between some remains dauntingly large.

## VI

However, in conclusion I want to be positive. The Northern Ireland problem is not insoluble. Real progress is truly possible, however progress must be based on accepted international standards of democracy. As long as all sides subscribe to the same principles of democracy, I firmly believe that we can navigate a path through the present political impasse.

In Northern Ireland, most people wish to live in peace with their neighbours while recognising the right of those neighbours to be different from a cultural, linguistic, educational or religious perspective.

Unionists accept the international norms for a divided society. Indeed we have interpreted them in a maximalist fashion, going further to accommodate diversity than in any other European country. While we have moved to the centreline of international best practice and beyond it, the republican movement still remains short of this centreline.

Our position is not one of unionism making more demands upon republicanism than are made upon us. Nor is it merely about the implementation of the Belfast Agreement. It is much more fundamental than that. It is about an issue that goes to the very heart of democratic values, the protection of democracy against the threat of violence.

Let me make it clear, Sinn Fein has a conditional right to participate in the government of Northern Ireland at executive level: this automatic inclusiveness would indeed be a unique form of government. However, to exercise this right Sinn Fein must show responsibility towards democratic values accepted elsewhere.

No other part of the democratic world would accept entry to government by a party which has direct linkages with a para-military organisation that has merely declared a cease-fire. A cease-fire alone by the IRA is not enough to demonstrate commitment to

peace and democracy. There is an obligation by the republican movement at this time to deliver a clear message that it is committed permanently to peace.

We wish to see a real and honourable accommodation based on the Belfast Agreement and accepted standards of democracy. For our part, we have been, are, and will remain, committed to universally accepted standards of human rights and democracy. We have no desire to seek to define these in any restrictive manner.

If that willingness from all to deliver balanced commitments is forthcoming - and I have not closed my mind to that possibility - we have another opportunity to put aside old enmities and focus on building a healthy society and a strong economy: a Northern Ireland where human rights of all sections of the community are sacrosanct.

That is the future that the vast majority of unionism wants. The next few weeks will show whether or not we can begin finally to put to rest this long out-dated quarrel.

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