

Strand Two

Opening Address Tuesday October 7

Labour believes that there will be no workable solution that excludes the recognition of differing identities within Northern Ireland. Much as some or many would engage in wishful thinking about ignoring the 'Irish' dimension the fact is that some 40% of the population feel Irish, to varying degrees, and want that dimension to their culture recognised in tangible institutional form. Those people are not saying to the Unionists that they should be less British but they are demanding that their status be given equal recognition.

This may appear a harsh opening comment but it has to be accepted as a basic truth by Unionists and they must stop playing mind games that any sizeable portion of the Catholic population would, at present, vote for the union. However, for Unionists to accept that truth is not to be 'giving into Republican violence' or 'surrendering' to use the emotive term. Rather it is to sit down and accept the realities and come up with workable solutions that Labour believes will meet the realistic aspirations of the vast majority of people, not just in Northern Ireland but in the Republic and Great Britain.

If there is evidence, that given the chance tomorrow, then most Catholics would vote for a united Ireland then there is equally evidence that, given an honourable settlement, most Catholics would accept Northern Ireland. Therein lies the comfort and protection that should assure unionists and ensure their cultural identity. From that basis Unionists should enter Strand Two confidently determined to reach solutions that benefit their constituents.

Republicans have every right to state their aspirations which, when shorn of the gun, are just as legitimate as those of the Unionists. In our opinion they should not, however, enter these talks on the single premise that a united Ireland is achievable or perhaps, in the context of seeking lasting peace on this island, even desirable. They must search for a settlement that gives to their constituents lasting peace, prosperity and inclusion because that is what the people truly want. We believe that the driving force behind their support over the last thirty years has not been the pursuit of a united Ireland but a search for inclusion, acceptance, and equality.

To all sides we must say that majority rule either within Northern Ireland or within an all Ireland context is irrelevant to the future of the people of this island. While the 'wishes of majority' presently offers comfort to unionists it also, at some later date, presents them with problems. Equally the 'right of the people of Ireland to decide their own future' gives solace to Republicans but offers no solution whatsoever to the future peaceful governance of this island. What we must all agree is that majoritarianism offers no solutions and that our only hope is to construct solutions that make us all winners.

Labour firmly believes that all Ireland co-operation not only recognises different cultural identities but also provides a wonderful opportunity to develop social interaction and institutions that will be of enormous benefit to our people culturally, economically and socially.

Having an irrational land border distorts any socio economic infrastructure but at least in Europe they are working to overcome these drawbacks. Only here, in Ireland, have we allowed ancient disputes to hinder our development. If there ever was a case of biting your nose to spite your face then this is it.

Labour believes that the people will benefit from co-operation in real and meaningful ways in areas such as health, education, public utilities, tourism and general infrastructure. However, we caution that the people must be involved in real and meaningful senses. This concept reaches far beyond simply two legislatures or governments arranging matters but goes down into the communities involved. The people of Monaghan, Cavan, Tyrone or Armagh do not want to be simply ruled, at a distance, by legislatures in Belfast or Dublin. Rather they want real and meaningful involvement in the institutions that govern vital services in their lives.

Mr Chairman Labour expresses regret over the recent decision of Minister McDaid concerning the cross border tourist campaign. Such insensitivity beggars belief. However, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise in that it highlighted a real concern in Northern Ireland; that the Dublin government will treat Northern Ireland like an errant child and operate the old maxim 'do as I say not as I do'.

The people of Northern Ireland must have cast iron assurances from Dublin that co-operation means really that and that there is a willingness to be even handed in the implementation of any matters that are devolved to cross border bodies. Firmly but assuredly we assert that co-operation is not a one way street but, at this stage, we are very concerned about the actual operational mode of the Dublin government on the ground.

Labour is firmly in support of cross border institutions where there are demonstrable benefits to the entire people of this island.