# FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM AND COMMON INTERESTS AND THEMES

# AN ALLIANCE OPENING STATEMENT TO STRAND 2

October 1997

# FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM

In the Alliance opening statement to Strand 1, we presented our Analysis of the Problem with reference to four principles which we hold to be fundamental to the understanding, and the resolution, of the problems of the first set of relationships - those within Northern Ireland. The other Northern Ireland parties, and the British Government representatives are familiar with that paper and I will not reiterate all the arguments set forward in it, since it is available. Strand 2 is of course about relationships between North and South, but it is greatly influenced by how we view the matters addressed in Strand 1, and so, in particular for the Irish Government representatives to whom this paper is largely addressed, I will briefly summarise those four fundamental principles:

The first is, that the people of Northern Ireland, despite their obvious divisions, form a historic and coherent community, and have the right to determine their own future, and participate directly in their own governance. A regional government is necessary to provide a common focus of loyalty, and an opportunity to share in self-government.

Secondly, that this community, whatever its historical coherence, is characterised by differences, and our primary objective must be the protection and the valuing of minorities.

Thirdly, that as in every community, stability and prosperity require the achievement and maintenance of law and order, our recent history ensures that in Northern Ireland we must be especially attentive to the requirement that at every level those who take positions of responsibility and represent all strands in our community, must have, and must exercise, confidence in the law and in those who administer it.

And finally, that there is a contribution to be made, and a price to be paid for peace in our community, not only by those who live in Northern Ireland, but also by those who live in the rest of the United Kingdom, and in the Republic of Ireland.

As we enter Strand 2, we address the second set of relationships - those between Northern Ireland and the rest of the island. In this introductory statement I should like to address underlying realities, identity, allegiance, and constitutional matters.

# UNDERLYING REALITIES, IDENTITY, ALLEGIANCE, AND CONSTITUTIONS

To speak of underlying realities is immediately to imply that what appears on the surface may indeed be superficial, and it is certainly my conviction that much of what passes for accepted knowledge, is simply illusion.

In the early 1920's there were considerable illusions about the strength and nature of the attitudes of the pro-union people of the North. There was a notion that if the

British Government were to stand aside northerners and southerners would soon be reconciled. The southern delegates at Downing Street in 1921 seemed readily to agree that Ulster should be given a free choice, but found it more difficult to answer Lloyd George's question as to what would happen if the northerners declined to cooperate. This is a position which is not hard to find in some circles to this day. Perhaps it was the strength of the assumption that the resistance of non-nationalists was a passing notion of no great depth or strength, that explains why it was such a minor issue in the bitter debates in the Dail that followed the signing of the Treaty. I would cite as evidence of this, estimations that of the 338 printed pages which the report of the debate fills, only 9 are devoted to partition, and two-thirds of these contributed by deputies from Monaghan.

That this illusion still persists is suggested to me by the expectations amongst the authors of the Anglo-Irish Agreement that whilst there might be passing annoyance and protest, it would be only a matter of time until there was some form of acceptance Even twelve years later this was not the case.

It is my hope that the people at this table will not imagine that the problem in Ireland is the border. I believe that it was Professor J C Beckett who first said "The real partition is not on the map, but in the minds of men." It is in the hearts and minds and relationships of the people that we must look for the underlying realities.

Whether or not the border is seen to be the origin of the problem, it is nevertheless the case that there may be those here who would subscribe to the notion of the nation-state. In the Irish context this idea is often further elaborated to propose that an Irish nation-state should be contiguous with our particular physical geography. That is to say that there is an Irish Nation, which should identify with an Irish State, whose boundary should conform with the island of Ireland. It is this idea which was espoused in the 1937 constitution.

There is a profound romantic appeal to the proposition of an independent island nation state, and indeed I may say from a psychological point of view, the simple attractive proposition of being at one with oneself on an island surrounded by water, has the deepest of reassuring maternal resonances. It takes all of us back to a time before we can remember, and may point to why the feminine, and especially the maternal element has played such a central role in Irish religious, political, cultural, mythological, and social life.

It has taken a woman, the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, to point out to us, in her inspiring inaugural speech, that the sense of identity which is Irishness is not particularly a matter of statehood. "The State," she said, "is not the only model of community with which Irish people can and do identify." Her expression of freedom, which for me broke the link between mere state allegiance and a sense of Irishness, meant that her election could be a matter of joy in East Belfast as well as in Ballina.

The truth is that it is not possible to define what a nation is, except on the crudest and most primitive of racialist theories. Nationhood is for many people a precious and a deeply meaningful thing, but it is essentially a matter of the heart, and as such is not

exclusivist. It cannot be defined as a state can, and it is corrupted, and sometimes positively dangerous, when we mix it with the politics of statehood.

Most states are not in any real sense national entities. Belgium isn't. Switzerland isn't. The United Kingdom isn't. And while the Basques, and the Bretons share common citizenship and statehood with other Spaniards and Frenchmen, they certainly do not regard themselves as being part of a Spanish nation or a French nation. As others too are trying to resolve deep bloody historic divisions, we do well to reflect on what has happened when that most rugged and persistent nation, the Jews, have sought to identify Jewish nationhood with a particular piece of ground, the state of Israel. To identify Irishness with allegiance to a particular state is to confuse, to alienate and to divide Irish men and women.

'But,' some of you will say, 'when the former President spoke of the Irish diaspora, she was speaking of something different. The Irish emigres in North America, Australia, and even those in England, have chosen to leave home. They hold allegiance to their own state. They are Americans (albeit Irish-Americans), Australians, and some are even British, but to live on the island of Ireland is something quite different. Whatever about nationhood or identity, there is the question of statehood. It is surely clear that the boundary of the state should conform to the natural frontier provided by the sea.'

This is a misunderstanding of the history and social geography of Ireland. Communities are formed through communication between people. Through ties of kinship (which we do not choose, but into which we are born) we develop a sense of identity and often of nationhood. Through the politics of social and economic intercourse, and the need for mutual protection (which we do choose, and which may change) we develop states and the benefits of citizenship. This is all on the basis of communication.

As I pointed out in the introduction to Strand 1, in the past the water, if it was not too wide, was not necessarily a frontier. On the contrary it was a channel of communication. It was easier and a good deal less dangerous to travel back and forth between the North-East of Ireland and the South-West of Scotland than to venture inland and across country to Galway or to Cork. That is why not only the Presbyterians of Antrim and Down, but also many of the Catholics of the Glens of Antrim, are originally Scots, some of them of very ancient pre-reformation descent. The community in the North-East of the island, whose actual extent has varied considerably over the centuries, has always had a regional distinctiveness, and powerful relationships with Scotland.

There are some whose attachment to the notion of an island nation state, is such that they will happily sacrifice not only relationships but lives to bring it about. Others simply say in a wistful, and sad way, "What have we done wrong that Northerners do not want to be part of a unitary state."

Perhaps they are asking the wrong question. When a young man asks himself, "Why does she not love me?" he will often tell himself that he is not handsome enough, not clever enough, not wealthy enough, or perhaps not of the same social class, or

religion. In general these are not the issues. She does not love him, because she does not love him. It is not something rational. It is a matter of the heart. The real question for the young man is "Why are you so besotted with her, that despite the fact that she has eyes only for another, you make a nuisance of yourself about her?" (In these days of equal opportunity I must take care to point out that the gender identifications I have used are by way of example only.) But the question is important. Southern nationalists should ask themselves why it is that they are so determined to take to themselves people, who whilst happy to live beside them, and indeed be friends, do not want to sign a marriage contract. Indeed the more they press their attentions, the more their suit is likely to cause offence, and there is no more clear aspect of this than the threatened shot-gun marriage pre-figured in Articles 2 & 3 of the Irish Constitution.. What is this desire that it cannot be satisfied with "the hand of friendship,..... and no strings attached?" if I may quote again from former President Mary Robinson.

It is hard for us to accept the realities of life, especially in matters of the heart, but it is now a fact of history that this is the position. The majority of the people of the North-East of the island do have a desire for good neighbourly relations, but if these talks, or the evolution of European integration, is seen as some kind of back door to a United Ireland, then dreams are being dreamt which can make a real relationship more difficult.

## COMMON INTERESTS AND THEMES

If these are some of the underlying realities, the varying identities, the divergent allegiances, and the constitutional problems, what are the common interests and themes that bring us together?

We must not forget that there are already many social and cultural realms where cooperation throughout the island is considerable. The main Christian denominations, many sporting, professional and trade organisations, and artistic and cultural bodies always have operated, throughout the island. There is an extensive network of trusting and solid cooperation on which to build the social relationship between North and South.

There is also a wealth of opportunity for us to learn more from each other in the economic field, and out of that to enjoy unprecedented growth and development. For years we have known that in agriculture, tourism, energy, transport, the environment and economic development, the opportunities for cooperation are very considerable, and the price that both North and South have paid for its relative absence, has been similarly considerable. That is not to say that working together is without its difficulties, but it is clear that our small island, wholly inside the European Community, must address these issues if we are not to suffer quite unforgivably in the future.

In order to achieve such developments, and to help build the relationships which will ensure that Northern Nationalists need not feel that they are cut off from their fellows

in the South, it will be necessary for institutional recognition of the North-South relationship. We look forward to an early opportunity to make proposals, and explore with colleagues around this table, the opportunities for such practical, accountable, mutually respectful institutions of government as may be part of the settlement to which we have committed ourselves to work.