

SIR PATRICK MAYHEW'S SPEECH  
TO THE BIA

When this Conference last convened in Oxford two years ago, it was almost immediately after the IRA's ceasefire.

We were in the Queen's College: and when on the Sunday it was over I remember walking in one of the walled gardens and thinking how the ceasefire had seemed to have had a strangely disorienting effect on the proceedings. It was as though a dominating feature had been suddenly removed from a familiar landscape.

Ever since the founding of the Association people had conferred and debated under the shadow of 'the Troubles'. It was suddenly all very strange and uncertain, but also strangely wonderful.

I thought it was quite different by the time we met last year. By then the general mood seemed to be one of acceptance that the Troubles were over for good; that such would be the public's influence after 12 months of no bombs or shootings that no one would find it possible to go back to violence even if they wanted to. There could be no going back: so what on earth was the problem?

Tragically, the reality was very different. It was in some quarters thought tasteless to refer to it; but the uncomfortable truth was that throughout all the preceding twelve months the IRA had continued to target fresh victims in preparation for killing them: had continued to develop and try out new mortars and other improvised weapons; had continued to intimidate and racketeer, and to perpetrate hideous punishment beatings. Their arsenals were undiminished.

In all this kind of activity they had been matched no less menacingly by Loyalist paramilitary (or terrorist) gangs.

This was what was making it so desperately difficult to keep up an encouraging and positive response to the (by then) two ceasefires, without either removing all incentives to embrace the principles of non-violence, or making it impossible to get all constitutional parties to the conference table with Sinn Fein.

A year further on still, to vast dismay and disappointment and sometimes disbelief, we are now back under the same familiar shadow. Indeed the shadow has got darker and perhaps more threatening, and there are plenty of people who, viewing all this, are not far from despair.

So it is not a scene upon which the Secretary of State for the past 4 1/2 years can look upon with a pride born of patent success.

And, I have to acknowledge, there is still more. For July gave us a horrifying glimpse - a good deal more than a glimpse - of what widespread civil strife would be like: of what the consequences would be if we gave up the attempt to get people sitting down together round a table, and talking their way through to a negotiated accommodation based upon consent; but instead, admitted defeat.

The week around Drumcree was a black one in the history of Northern Ireland. It was a week in which the rule of law was violently, deliberately and it has to be said successfully challenged, and the security forces put under savage attack from mobs on both sides.

Nobody committed to peace and to the rule of law can look back on those dire events and see them in terms of winners and losers. There were only losers - the Province as a whole, the democratic process, and for all those who support and depend for their liberty upon the rule of law.



The only people who profited from them were the sinister people on both sides who sought to manipulate the situation to their own malign ends. The only people who found comfort in them were those who feel more at home with the certainties of conflict than with the challenges of peace.

The wounds will take, I know, a very long time to heal.

All this is only to acknowledge what is real.

But it is not the whole reality, and to allow people to suppose that it is the whole reality would be just as wrong as to suggest that we are experiencing only a little local difficulty. In the remainder of the picture there are in truth some brighter colours, and less gloomy themes. I wish to point to some.

First, there is already a wider understanding of reality itself. No problem can be solved without analysis, and accurate analysis at that. I think that until recently we have lacked an accurate insight into the intensity of feeling existing in each side of this divided community. For my own part, and I think for a great many people, the wish had been father to the thought that on each side ancient fires of hostility and fear had greatly diminished. They had not.

It was as though a reassuring crust had formed over the volcano's crater. On the surface of that crust we had been executing many an elegant design and had been proposing many an exciting structure.

But the volcano was not extinct, and when it erupted it did so with horrifying ferocity. More than that, it is quite plain that supporters of, and sometimes participants in, the violence deployed on both sides were, time and again, professional and cultivated people one had associated with steady and moderate demeanour. They were fastidious as to the methods employed, perhaps, but quite clear that they wanted to see "their side" draw a line in the sand and hold it.

Nevertheless, despite all the negative aspects, and they are grave indeed, I think we are the wiser for being shown the truth. We have got a long road to travel, and it is necessary that we should know just how stony it is.

Next, the very horror of the events surrounding Drumcree and its aftermath has sunk in and exerted its own influence. Since then, in various contested marches there has often been evident a preparedness to accept an accommodation, and a balancing off between conflicting rights and liberties.

I very much regret that the Apprentice Boys parade in the maiden City on 11 August could not have been settled by agreement. But nevertheless there was a wide determination amongst people that their City, which had pulled itself up by its bootstraps, was not going to suffer the destruction they had seen unleashed elsewhere, and been revolted by. In the event the responsible attitude of the Governor of the Apprentice Boys and the determined leadership of John Hume secured that the restricted march passed off without violence.

Like many of the hardest moral questions, the issue of parades is one of legitimate but incompatible rights. The right to march is one protected in all democratic societies, in many cases in the constitution itself. In this country, however, we also recognise the reasonable expectation of communities not to feel intimidated in their own neighbourhoods. That is difficult enough. It becomes more difficult when the neighbourhood through which a march is by long tradition intended to pass has changed dramatically in its character and composition.

In the case of Drumcree, everyone needs to reflect on what more could have been done to improve the prospects for agreement, and what more can be done in future years - I certainly include ourselves in this. This is why we have instigated an independent



review of the whole problem, under the chairmanship of Dr North, and comprising also Dr John Dunlop and Father Oliver Crilly. We need an accepted means of resolving conflict between these important rights. I hope that review will be very fully assisted in its work from all sides, including many assembled here. I have asked for its recommendations by the end of January so that Northern Ireland may be able to benefit from the work in good time.

It is, however, the truth that the fears and sensitivities that make the issue of certain marches so abominably difficult and dangerous stem from and reflect the deep divisions that disfigure Northern Ireland. These, as we all know, still lie deeper and wider than many have cared to admit, and certainly deeper and wider than most of us have met with elsewhere. They are indeed about culture and tradition; but above all they are about people's fears of being dominated by "the other side". Those fears can only be allayed if each side is seen to have replaced its perceived desire to dominate the other by agreeing with it to a negotiated comprehensive settlement.

Here lies the third area in which I think it is sensible to find encouragement. More widely held now than it was is the belief that talks must be given a chance. Talks are rightly seen as representing the only way forward: the only alternative to violence as the means by which Northern Ireland's future will be shaped.

I do not say most people are optimistic as to the outcome. Northern Ireland is not a place to look for optimism at the best of times. For many it does not go beyond saying that nothing will probably come of it, but it must be tried. But that in itself is an advance.

It is wrong to underplay the progress that has been made in the establishment of talks: wrong, because it adds unnecessarily and harmfully to depression; wrong because it saps our creative energies. Contrary to what so many people thought practicable, Talks were indeed convened on 10 June, albeit in circumstances of

massive difficulty concerning how they were to be chaired. After two days it looked very much as though they would founder on this issue. The effect would have been catastrophic. It deserves to be stated that this was averted by the courageous initiative and leadership of David Trimble.

Those talks are to resume, after the August break, on Monday. I don't doubt they will prove extremely difficult. Progress within them has been maddeningly slow, I know. But when we recall that in 1991/92 it took many months to agree rules of procedure, then the 6 weeks we have taken this time acquires a different perspective. And it was after Drumcree, not before those events, that this crucially important agreement on the rules was reached, and agreement was reached also to resume on 9 September. I want to say here that by Senator George Mitchell, General John de Chastelain, and Mr Harri Holkeri, Northern Ireland has been outstandingly and uniquely served.

I am sure we can resume these talks with hope for the future. There is good reason to hope that they can build on past progress. The negotiations will take place on an agreed agenda, within which each party can raise any significant issue of concern to them. But this is not to say that we have to reinvent the wheel. We have learned much from previous rounds of talks, particularly those in 1991-92. We hope to build on agreements reached then, notably that any settlement needs to address all the relationships at issue; those within Northern Ireland, those between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, and those between the two governments. There is also general agreement that any settlement needs to win the allegiance of both communities in Northern Ireland. The object of the talks exercise is to create stability through a just and enduring settlement. There is no prospect of this happening through a one-sided outcome which leaves one community with a continuing sense of grievance.



For that reason there is no predetermined outcome to the talks; but the principles on which a settlement will be based are already agreed by the overwhelming majority of the parties as well as the two Governments. Ironically, the constitutional question which is central to Unionist concerns may well be the least controversial. The Nationalist parties, bar Sinn Fein, have already accepted the principle of consent. So while we cannot tell how future generations will view it, there are widely recognised indications that the Union is here to stay as far as we can see into the future.

The 1991-92 talks and subsequent discussions have given us a good idea of what an acceptable outcome might look like. The principle of consent is clear. So is the principle that any agreement needs to win the allegiance of both communities, and to give parity of esteem to the culture, identities and aspirations of both sides. Recognising these principles might require compromise on both sides. But they are also fundamental in any democratic society, and any attempt to circumvent them would not only make cross community agreement impossible, it would also be unjust in its own right.

New institutions of government within Northern Ireland are needed. To be stable, they need to be democratic, effective and even handed, with a system of detailed checks and balances intended to sustain confidence in them.

Both we and the Irish Government also see a role for a new formalised North-South relationship and structure. And both Governments also envisage a new, more broadly based and acceptable Agreement to replace the Anglo Irish Agreement, and as part of an overall settlement the ending of all Irish claims to jurisdiction over Northern Ireland.

We believe that these will be the likely features of an acceptable outcome. But the final decision on that is not for the Governments, but for the parties themselves, and the people of Northern Ireland

voting in a referendum. And in the Downing Street Declaration, the British Government made it clear it would be prepared to introduce the necessary legislation to give effect to any measure of agreement which was reached freely and without external impediment.

One thing which will undoubtedly make our task in the talks harder is the atmosphere of threat in which they are taking place. Only the IRA knows what they are hoping to achieve through their continuing campaign. The talks are the only real game in town, and Sinn Fein has excluded itself through the IRA's actions. In doing so they harm only their own supporters, who have a rightful expectation to have their interests promoted at the talks. It is Sinn Fein who perpetuate their exclusion from the process. They know well how to end that.

It is clear to everyone that an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire would be the greatest contribution to restoring confidence. I know also that everyone here will join me in calling on the loyalist parties to continue their efforts to maintain the loyalist ceasefires. But I am acutely aware that everyone has their part to play in creating the necessary atmosphere of confidence for talks to be successful.

It is natural to ask what can be the prospects for an agreement in all party negotiations if agreement even on marching 400 yards proved impossible. Paradoxically, I believe the atmosphere may become more constructive when negotiations reach the real issues at stake. The issue of how Northern Ireland is to be governed goes to the heart of the divisions in Northern Irish society. The lack of agreement on ancillary matters has hitherto soured the atmosphere, and sometimes escalated every dispute to a proxy show of strength for the negotiations ahead.

Northern Ireland politics are not a winner takes all game. We all lose if the Province is allowed to divide into implacable and violent camps. Everyone in Northern Ireland during the ceasefires



has caught a glimpse, and more than a glimpse, of the potential gains a lasting peace could give the entire Province. It has not been just the absence of fear, something quite new for an entire generation. It has included the consequential growth in investment interest, the growth in employment, the growth in tourism, and the revival of esteem in the world for Northern Ireland. It would be all the more bitter if these prizes were to be lost. The responsibility for causing it to be lost would be profound.

Everyone, in every quarter, therefore has a responsibility to fulfil. For our part we continue, with the Irish Government, to be wholly committed to the search for stability through an accommodation, to be reached by negotiations, and to be underpinned by broad acceptance and consent. We approach the days ahead with resolution, and with sober hope.