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Identity, Allegiance and Underlying Realities

Background

1 The heart of the problem in Northern Ireland is a conflict between two separate identities. They involve conflicting allegiances which transcend the confines of Northern Ireland itself. This conflict is the legacy of the difficult and often tragic relationship between these two islands, centred predominantly on the question whether and to what extent Ireland should enjoy the right of self-determination, vis-a-vis Great Britain.

2 The difference of opinion on this issue was reflected also within the population of Ireland. Various Home Rule measures to meet Irish nationalist demands for autonomy foundered on the refusal of the unionist minority to accept any arrangement, even within the UK, under which the island would be governed by the nationalist majority.

3 Unionist recourse to paramilitary force, including the first illegal shipment of arms into Ireland in modern times, in order to negate the will of the British Parliament on this issue, was a major influence in turning the nationalist population to similar postures and methods, with results which reverberate to our own day. It was however successful insofar as serious British negotiation with the nationalist tradition took place only after the creation of Northern Ireland as a separate entity dedicated to the rule of the unionist community.

Developments in Northern Ireland

4 The creation of Northern Ireland did not however resolve the problem. This was partly due to the troubled circumstances of its origin. In the words of the historian J C Beckett ("The Ulster Debate, page 17)

"In origin ... Northern Ireland represented an area artificially carved out, and containing a divided population, with a substantial minority utterly opposed to the whole transaction; while even the majority, on whose account the transaction had been conceived, were obliged to accept a new constitutional system that they had not asked for and did not want".

5 The creation of Northern Ireland inverted the roles of majority and minority which had existed in the island as a whole. It concentrated the problem into the "narrow ground" of Northern Ireland, where, it is generally accepted, the inherited animosities between the two

traditions were more intense than elsewhere in Ireland. From the outset it represented a major new issue of contention. As was recognised in the British Government's White Paper of 1973,

"a fundamental problem since the earliest years of Northern Ireland's existence has been disagreement not just about how Northern Ireland should be governed, but as to whether it should exist at all".

6 Faced with this situation the unionist community deployed its inbuilt majority to contain the perceived disloyalty of more than a third of the population. Formal majoritarian rules in an area delimited to guarantee a communal majority, ensured a unionist monopoly of power at all levels. There was no floating vote on the constitutional issue, which overrode all others.

7 At the same time this monopoly did not allay basic unionist insecurities. The perceived threat of a nationalist majority in the island as a whole, viewed as Roman Catholic in ethos, gave a strong and explicit denominational cast to Unionist politics which still persists. The uncomfortable size of the nationalist minority within Northern Ireland was addressed through discrimination rather than conciliation. The result was that the two communities in Northern Ireland remained locked in a psychology of mutual refusal which culminated in serious violence. After more than seventy years of its existence, Northern Ireland manifests a continued and apparently undiminished polarisation between the two communities within its boundaries. It remains as true as it was at the establishment of the State that, in the words of the UUP document "The Way Forward" (1984, page 2)

"The basis of this conflict lies in the ultimate political aspirations of the two communities and in their sense of national and political identity and the allegiance that goes with it".

#### Nature of Identities and Allegiances

8 The Forum Report (paragraph 4.6 - 4.10) offers a painstaking analysis of the various components of these conflicting identities, with a view to considering how they could best be reconciled. This analysis remains valid and is adopted here. It must be accepted however that both communities are also, to an extent, self-defining in opposition to each other. The politics of domination and denial and the categories of victory and defeat have tended to govern their relationship. The tensions and fears of a divided society can distort perceptions on both sides. The result is a society which is physically intermingled and shares many objective identities of culture and outlook and yet is deeply divided. It is politically polarised and self-segregating because of basic differences of identity and allegiance which both sides agree are crucial. If, in Bagehots dictum, "the first prerequisite of elective Government is the mutual confidence of the electors", that prerequisite has yet to be fulfilled in relation to the population of Northern Ireland as a whole.

#### Choice of approach



9 A society polarised in this way between two conflicting identities and allegiances may organise its government in one of two ways. It can operate through the domination of one tradition, or through finding a sufficient measure of agreement and accommodation between both to permit active cooperation.

10 The domination of one tradition was the characteristic and salient feature of government during the Stormont period. The experience of that period has led to a deep determination on the part of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, supported by a wide consensus outside Northern Ireland, that this approach should not be repeated. There are in any case strong arguments to suggest that an attempt to impose patterns of domination on a minority of well over a third of the entire population must eventually prove as impractical as it is morally and politically dubious.

#### Need for genuine accommodation between the two identities and allegiances

11 The alternative, therefore, is an accommodation between the two. There are formidable obstacles in the way. The two sides are profoundly divided on most of the fundamental issues of identity, allegiance, legitimacy of institutions and ultimate political goals. Accommodation therefore will not simply happen. It must be deliberately constructed in a conscious cooperative effort. If that endeavour is to win the political support of both communities it can only be on a basis of equal and of mutual respect as between both identities and allegiances. Both, in the words of the Forum report (5.2(4))

"... must have equally satisfactory, secure and durable. Political, administrative and symbolic expression and protection".

12 It follows that new arrangements must be based on respect for the essential values and aspirations of unionism. As the Forum Report made clear, and all participants agreed in the earlier sessions of the Talks, the best people to identify the interests of the unionist tradition are the unionist people themselves. One of the most valuable aspects of the present Talks is that they allow the elected representatives of the unionist people to do so in constructive political dialogue with representatives of the nationalist tradition, since, if the Talks are to succeed, the outcome must also be based on equal respect for the essential values and aspirations of nationalism.

13 Northern nationalists felt their interests and aspirations were prejudiced by the creation of Northern Ireland in a number of different ways:

- it denied their aspiration to independence, in contrast to the rest of the nationalist population in Ireland;
- it cut off or severely impaired very many of their links with the rest of Ireland;
- it enclosed them in an area designed to ensure a safe communal majority for one tradition, under majoritarian rules which could not fulfill certain



basic democratic requirements such as change of Government or distribution of power in those circumstances;

- the symbols and ethos of the State were based for the most part on an explicit rejection of the nationalist identity;
- they were victims of economic, social and cultural discrimination.

14 If the nationalist community is to identify with new institutions and arrangements then these must offer hope and reassurance to them in relation to their basic concerns. If change is to be agreed, it will be because new arrangements address these concerns in ways that are clearly better than under present systems. In certain areas the necessary search for accommodation is particularly challenging, since there is a direct and outright conflict between the two aspirations, for example in relation to issues of sovereignty. In others, such as the question of majoritarian rule, the necessary limits or qualifications on its operation, if they are to be genuine safeguards, must by definition be entrenched beyond the reach of the communal majority, and therefore perhaps unwelcome to it. Nevertheless both communities have a demonstrable common interest in the creation of generally acceptable political structures. In still other areas the conflict is more apparent than real. Developments such as dynamic North/South structures, an official ethos which draws on the riches of both traditions, conciliatory symbolism, optimum safeguards for human and communal rights must surely serve the interests of all.

#### Need for accommodation to transcend the confines of Northern Ireland

15 The conflicting identities and allegiances in Northern Ireland both clearly relate to wider external relationships. The search for accommodation must therefore necessarily transcend the confines of Northern Ireland and address these wider relationships through arrangements and structures which cater adequately for them. This requirement is now almost universally accepted. It is reflected in the Anglo- Irish Agreement, where both Governments explicitly recognise the need for continuing efforts to reconcile and to acknowledge the rights of the two major traditions that exist in Ireland, represented on the one hand by those who wish for no change in the present status of Northern Ireland and on the other hand by those who aspire to a sovereign united Ireland achieved by peaceful means and through agreement. The provisions of the Agreement include a number of practical steps in this direction. The agreed basis for the Talks explicitly recognises that the hope of achieving a new and more broadly based agreement rests on finding a way to give adequate expression to the totality of \* ) relationships. If, as certain delegations have urged, proposals for constitutional change emerging from the negotiations were to include changes to the Irish Constitution, the strength and quality of the proposed links between both parts of Ireland would be one of the important factors in shaping the judgment of the electorate in this regard.

#### Common Interests

16 A new accommodation must begin by recognising the causes of past failures and seeking methodically to remedy them. It must also seek to build on the common bonds which



exist across the divide in Northern Ireland and between both parts of Ireland. These are stronger and deeper than might appear to be the case. It is often left to outsiders to point to the extensive shared culture, traditions, and values common to all parts of Ireland, which are eclipsed by the political divide but continue independently of it.

17 Beyond this common heritage there are major common interests. Everyone in Ireland has a profound interest in the peace, stability and prosperity of the whole island, and in close and harmonious relationships with our neighbouring island. The pursuit of these objectives is inseparable from the search for agreed political institutions and structures. Progress towards European Union creates unprecedented challenges and opportunities for both parts of Ireland, and its impact will in many areas dictate a joint response. The legacy of history cannot be changed. It has, however, bequeathed us many bonds of union as well as points of discord. That is also a basic underlying reality which all participants should seek to build on in the search for a new beginning in relationships through these Talks.