

DRAFT ARTICLE ON NORTHERN IRELAND

My objective in Northern Ireland has always been a comprehensive political settlement, negotiated between the parties, which can bring about lasting peace. Last year, we set up multi-party talks to this end. These talks continue. Progress is painfully slow, despite all our efforts. But we are not discouraged. We will make every possible effort to make further rapid progress, before and after the election.

But meanwhile the violence goes on, with almost daily attempts by the IRA to murder members of the security forces, and the ever-present risk that Loyalist frustration will lead them to abandon their ceasefire, rather than the isolated incidents we have seen so far.

Let us be realistic. This is not the encouraging picture I would like to see. And it is poor reward indeed for the hopes and expectations of the people of Northern Ireland, who had dared to hope that peace and normality might once again be theirs.

I am not discouraged. I continue to believe we are on the right track. We have a talks process involving nine constitutional parties representing X% of the population. It has agreed rules of procedure, and the agenda is also reasonably clear.

So why is progress held up? The superficial answer is lack of trust between the parties. Lack of trust is certainly there. But why is it so great? Part of the answer lies in history. But much of it lies in the

continuing violence of the IRA and the insistence of the republican movement in retaining violence as an option in a democratic society.

This affects all the constitutional parties, in different ways. On the nationalist side, rejection of violence is accompanied by a strong and understandable desire to bring Sinn Fein into the political process and the political mainstream. There is a belief that a final settlement cannot be reached without them, and that the violence will continue as long as Sinn Fein are not in the political process. This can lead to a kind of "waiting for Sinn Fein" syndrome, and a reluctance to move on without them.

On the Unionist side, republican violence leads to an equally strong and understandable insistence that no negotiations can be held with those who want to retain arms so that they can retain the option of violence. It reinforces a fear that, even if a political settlement is reached, it will never be seen by the republicans as going far enough, and Unionists will face a constant ratchet of republican demands, underpinned by violence or the threat of violence. So the basic confidence to do a deal is simply not there.

I do not say that without the violence miracles can happen overnight. There are deep-rooted problems to be tackled, and a need for confident and imaginative leadership to find solutions. Nor do I say that, with the violence, progress is impossible. We will not allow the will of the vast majority of the people to be subverted in this way.

But the violence corrodes the democratic process, and makes any move in the right direction much more difficult. Stop the violence, for good, and the chances of progress are infinitely greater.

So the question I ask myself constantly is this. What is republican violence now for? What aim are the men of violence actually pursuing? And how can they imagine that violence will help them achieve it?

The breaking of the ceasefire a year ago was a cynical and deliberate act. The myth that it was the inevitable result of inaction by the British and Irish Governments over the 18-month ceasefire has been comprehensively demolished by John Bruton in his Belfast Telegraph article on ... February. If any party showed no movement during that period of hope, it was precisely the IRA and Sinn Fein.

Is it to bring about a united Ireland? But it is quite clear that there can be no bypassing the consent of the people of Northern Ireland, and that the British Government can never be bombed into giving up the Union.

Is it to defend the nationalist community? It is hard to see, to put it no higher, how killing people and damaging the Province's economy helps the nationalist community from any point of view. The only effect of further violence may be to provoke a response from which the nationalist community will suffer too.

Is it to force their way into talks? This is manifestly absurd, since the only obstacle to Sinn Fein joining the talks is the absence of a credible and lasting halt to the violence.

Is it to prevent the talks, and the political process, succeeding? This may get nearer to it, for the so-called hard men. They fear a compromise which falls short of their demands. But, as I have said, terrorism will

certainly not bring their demands any closer to fulfilment. It can only push them further away.

Is it to force a new and different negotiating process, with a central role for Sinn Fein and the British Government, with others reduced essentially to observers? Again, this may be nearer the mark, for some dreamers. But it is an absurd idea – and certainly not one brought closer to reality by violence.

Is it to provoke a loyalist backlash or a security crackdown? Do they hope this would justify the violence, unite the nationalist community and lead to more communal trouble where republican aims might have more chance of flourishing? Perhaps. But such an approach would be the height of cynicism. And I do not believe anyone is going to fall for it.

The truth is that, even leaving aside its moral unacceptability, republican violence is completely and utterly futile. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that those behind it are stuck on an awful treadmill of their own making, unable to think of another way of behaving, because violence has been their way of life for so long.

Violence cannot create new opportunities for peace or bring impossible ambitions closer. It can only destroy.

And its capacity for destruction is great. It destroys the lives and property of those directly affected. It undermines the prospects for peace and a fair, comprehensive and lasting settlement. And last but by no means least, it may destroy the future chance of prosperity and jobs for the people of Northern Ireland.

Let me dwell on this point for a moment. The 18-month IRA ceasefire showed what Northern Ireland could look forward to if lasting peace were there. A look across the border to the Republic and its booming economy is further evidence, if it were needed.

I am delighted that Northern Ireland's economy has held up so well, despite the resumption of violence. Inward investment has continued to come in, and unemployment has fallen to its lowest level for x years.

But let us not kid ourselves. More violence in the longer term is bound to affect the economy and reduce the number of jobs. It is as simple as that, although we shall always do our utmost to counteract its effects.

Northern Ireland does not have to go back to the bad old days. There is a choice. And the responsibility for that choice lies with those behind the violence and associated with it, no matter how much they try to shuffle it off on to others.

Those who say they are politicians must choose politics, once and for all. That means leaving the men of violence behind, if they will not abandon that violence. That may mean breaking the unity which we hear is so much prized. But that unity is phoney and damaging. It will have to be broken sooner or later.

This may all sound gloomy. But in fact I am optimistic. Whatever the present difficulties I am confident that progress in the talks can be made, with or without Sinn Fein. I am confident that the rejection of violence by the people of Northern Ireland will finally get through to its perpetrators.

I am confident that, beneath the surface, the trends are in the right direction, and the outline of a final settlement can be seen. And I am confident in the ability and determination of the British government to make the final breakthrough, with the help of the political leadership in the Province and the Irish government.

There will be many difficulties on the way. One of the biggest challenges immediately facing us is to ensure no repetition of last year's violence associated with parades. We are setting up the Independent Commission recommended by the North Report as soon as its members can be appointed. It can begin work immediately to help local mediation, which has to be the best solution where there are disputes.

We are consulting rapidly on the further recommendation of Dr. North, that the commission should also take on an adjudicatory role. We have a genuinely open mind about this. I would only warn against any assumption that such a role for the Commission would be some kind of magic answer. As with the broader dispute of which the parades issue is a symptom, peaceful solutions to these disputes ultimately depend on consent, whoever takes the decisions.

Above all, let no-one doubt the commitment of the British Government to solve the problems of Northern Ireland through dialogue, as well as to pursue those responsible for violence through all the means at our disposal. There will be no let-up in either.

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