

DRAFT ARTICLE ON NORTHERN IRELAND

IRA VIOLENCE IS FUTILE

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, involving nine constitutional parties representing 85% of the population. 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 continuation of republican violence brings the ever present risk that loyalist frustration will lead them to abandon their ceasefire, rather than the isolated incidents we have seen so far.

There has been and will continue to be a firm and effective response to such violence – shown by the recovery in the last month alone of a huge range of illegal weaponry and the charges for serious terrorist offences against several individuals.

But let us be realistic. This is poor reward indeed for the hopes and expectations of the people of Northern Ireland, who had dared to believe that peace and normality might once again be theirs.

I am not discouraged. I continue to believe we are on the right track.

So why is progress held up? The superficial answer is lack of trust between the parties. Lack of trust is certainly there. Part of the cause of it 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 desire to bring Sinn Fein into the political process and the political mainstream, to wean Sinn Fein away from violence and help ensure any settlement sticks.. This can lead to a kind of "waiting for Sinn Fein" syndrome.

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 deliberately retain the option of violence. Such a retention reinforces a fear that, even if a political settlement is reached, it will never be seen by 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 success 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 continuing 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 aims are the men of violence actually pursuing? And how can they imagine that violence, and the death of a young soldier like Stephen Restorick, will help achieve them?

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 11 February. If anyone showed no movement during that period of hope, it was the IRA and Sinn Fein.

So why the terrorism?

Is it for a united Ireland? The Union could never be broken. It is too strong and founded on consent.

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 and local services helps the nationalist community from any point of view. Further violence may only provoke a response from which the nationalist community will suffer too.

Is it to force a 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. Indeed, with a credible ceasefire, they could have been in at the start of the talks on 10 June last year.

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 could never achieve lasting agreement.

Is it to provoke a loyalist backlash or a security crackdown? Do they hope this would justify their violence, unite the nationalist community and lead to more communal trouble where republican aims might have more chance of flourishing? Such an approach would be the height of cynicism. Perhaps it is their aim. But I do not believe anyone is falling 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. It can only destroy.

And its capacity for destruction is great. It destroys the lives and security of those directly affected. It destroys the chance of a normal life for the people of Northern Ireland. It undermines the prospects for peace and a fair, comprehensive and lasting settlement. It consumes precious resources which would otherwise go to schools, to hospitals, to housing, to roads and to job training. And last but by no means least, it may destroy the future chance of prosperity.

Let me dwell on this point for a moment. The 18-month IRA ceasefire brought renewed prosperity to Northern Ireland. I am delighted that the economy is holding up well, despite the violence. Inward investment has continued to come in, and unemployment has fallen to its lowest level for 16 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 those 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. Sinn Fein say that they want an IRA ceasefire and a credible process of inclusive negotiations. But it is in their hands to bring about a lasting ceasefire. There is an inclusive political process they can join, on the same basis as others, if the ceasefire is restored.

This may all sound sombre. But in fact I am hopeful. 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 broadly agreed 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 seek to ensure no repetition of last year's violence associated with parades. Following the North Report, we are setting up the Independent Commission as soon as its members can be appointed. It can begin work immediately to help local mediation, and to achieve local agreements, which provide the best way of avoiding confrontation.

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 goodwill and consent, whoever takes the decisions.

Above all, let no-one doubt the commitment of the British Government to help solve the problems of Northern Ireland through dialogue, as well as to

govern justly and pursue those responsible for violence through all the means at our disposal. There will be no let-up in either.

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