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Prime Minister
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The paramilitaries' day has gone

IT IS an observable phenomenon in Northern Ireland — and elsewhere — that tension and violence tend to rise when compromise is in the air. Maintaining "the integrity of the quarrel", as Churchill once put it, seems to be far more important to some factions, political as well as paramilitary, than trying to find any sort of realistic accommodation. The British and Irish governments are determined to press ahead, and we will not be deflected from helping the parties to put a draft agreement together, over the next few weeks, that can then be voted on by the people of Ireland, north and south.

We want the process to be as inclusive as possible. Obviously, we can do very little about those who voluntarily choose not to participate or to contribute to the building of peace in this way. But it is a reasonable requirement that those republican and loyalist parties participating should have to exercise a continuing restraining influence on associated paramilitary organisations, whose cessations made possible their involvement in the first place.

Members of the IRA, the INLA, the Continuity IRA, the UVF, UDA, UFF, LVF and any others need to realise, as President Clinton said in November 1995, that their day is over, and that the best contribution they can make to their respective communities is to abandon the gun and allow political issues to be settled democratically. Such organisations can only harm their own communities, and the anger in these communities would be better directed, not against the two governments, but at those who think they can flout the democratic rules (and their own commitments) with impunity.

We will not be influenced by threats of resumed violence from any quarter in response to anything that develops legitimately out of the talks process. The culture of paramilitarism is quite literally a dead end, and it has now been reduced to the futile and pathetic syndrome of doing something stupid in the hope that traditional enemies will react by doing something even more stupid. We



Bertie Ahern, the Irish Prime Minister, says the 'futile and pathetic' culture of violence in Ulster is a dead end — and Britain must persuade loyalists of that

have been trying to encourage republicans to engage in a new project. Britain must persuade loyalists to do the same.

The British and Irish governments, as well as public opinion in both countries, must make it clear to those who claim to be ultra-loyal or ultra-republican that our peoples want no more truck with political violence. Continued violence to try to force a northern Protestant and Unionist majority into a united Ireland against its will is utterly repugnant to the spirit of the United Irishmen, and is roundly rejected by all constitutional parties in the south. Trying to bring about a forced unity could have catastrophic consequences, even supposing it could ever be brought about. But, equally, British public opinion should make it clear it rejects and does not recognise the type of "loyalty" that consists of killing innocent Catholics.

Most Irish nationalists would have much less of a problem in reaching an accommodation with a modern 20th-century British identity. But there is difficulty about coming to terms with more extreme expressions of an identity that sometimes seem to have more in common with the hysteria of the Popish Plot or the Gordon Riots than anything recognisable in the western Europe of the late 20th century. In a situation where both Britain and Ireland need to engage in constitutional reform, I have some sympathy with Lord Alderdice's efforts to change archaic provisions in the British constitution, which in a Northern Ireland context are abused in a way that causes public disturbance and that

disguises the true democratic nature of the British state as a religious supremacy. Unionists would be rightly outraged if there were provisions in the Irish Constitution, which stipulated that the head of state or certain senior constitutional officers had to be Catholic (in fact, since independence two of our presidents, two of our deputy prime ministers and an opposition leader have been Protestant).

At a minimum, I would like to see as an integral part of a peace settlement an agreed solution to the few contentious marches, which would guarantee the Orangemen a particular route to and from their churches, while sparing local communities unwarranted intrusion and disruption into their lives. We cannot allow the marching season to be used by rival groups moving centre stage to derail a peace agreement.

It has always been part of the wisdom of the conservative tradition in British politics, which owes much to an Irishman named Edmund Burke, that timely and moderate constitutional change is the best way of maintaining continuity and stability. We watch, therefore, with interest the ambitious programme of constitutional reform being undertaken by the British Government which is likely to lead to new relationships within these islands. The late Sir John Biggs-Davison promoted in the 1980s the concept of an Islands of the North Atlantic Council, in which interest has been revived. We welcome the prospect of dealing in a multilateral context with Wales and Scotland as distinct political entities within the

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United Kingdom, though obviously our closest links will be with new democratic institutions in Northern Ireland.

Above all, it is the current peace talks which pose important challenges to everyone, including governments. Where you have a society with two communities of nearly equal size, with perhaps a 10 per cent in between, only partnership on a basis of equality has any hope of working. Democracy should never be understood just as crude majority rule. Unionists cannot any longer turn their backs on the nationalist tradition or the rest of Ireland. Equally, nationalist Ireland must accept that we have neither the right nor the power to impose our will on Unionists. Both Ireland and Britain as states must give up rival notions of territorial sovereignty over Northern Ireland that are not derived absolutely and exclusively from the principle of consent.

The relationship between Britain and Ireland as a whole should be an important influence on the relationship between Unionists and nationalists. I accept that the most important reassurance that Unionists need is that they will not be cut off from the British links that they cherish. Equally, Northern nationalists need Irish links which cherish them, and which guarantee their rightful place in the Irish nation, and the legitimacy of a united Ireland as an objective that can be reached peacefully by agreement and consent.

I would even hope that we can dismantle rigid demarcations. There is an Irish dimension to Britain, just as there is a British dimension to Ireland, both of which transcend narrow identifications. Both countries see themselves as pluralist, self-confident sovereign states — albeit of very different sizes. We should take positive steps to encourage accommodation, and accept our common duty to lead the two principal communities in Northern Ireland out of their historic defensiveness and mutual resentment, where that still exists.

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