

A NEW IRELAND IN A NEW EUROPE

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The major developments that have been taking place in Europe, the creation of the Single Market and now the drive towards European political union have all got profound implications for relations within Ireland, relations between Ireland and Britain and therefore what has become known as the Irish problem which today disfigures the North of Ireland.

Fifty years ago today the Second World War was in progress. Not for the first time in this century millions of people were to be slaughtered and cities right across Europe were to be devastated. The bitterness between European peoples had exploded once again into conflict and war. Difference for the 'nth' time in centuries was once again pushed to the point of division and the terrible price in human terms was again being paid. Once again nationality was more important than humanity.

If someone had stepped forth then and declared that in fifty years time all that would have changed and that we would be moving towards a United Europe, in which difference and identity would be respected, in which the French would still be French and the Germans would still be German, that person would have been described as a fool or a dreamer. But it has happened and it has profound lessons for areas of conflict everywhere, especially Ireland both parts of which are now part of the emerging unity of Europe. If the deep bitterness which separates peoples like the French and the German, a bitterness far deeper than that which divides the people of Ireland, could be laid aside, why cannot the Irish do likewise?

The peoples of Western Europe decided to leave the past behind, to work the common ground - largely economic - and to build institutions which would allow them to grow together at their own speed towards a new and United Europe that would not only respect difference and identity but would enhance its diversity. Can we in Ireland not do likewise and can both governments involved not declare that objective as their specific intention? If both parts of Ireland can build new relationships with Greeks, Germans, French, Italians all with whom we have much greater differences, can we not at least do the same with one another?

In any case, the forces of history and more importantly the forces of economics are all moving in that direction. In the Single Europe the border will be no more in real terms than a county boundary as good, people and services move freely across

it. This is evident in areas like agriculture, tourism, energy and transport, all central to our economic future and all of which will be intensified when we become the offshore island of a United Europe, the only part that has no land link with the rest.

At a more fundamental level the roots and the nature of our problem have also changed. The Irish problem is European in its origins. In centuries prior to the Act of Union the Irish had very strong links with the rest of Europe and very many common interests. It was precisely that fear of those links that led to the colonisation of Ireland and to what has become known as the British presence.

The Battle of the Boyne was a major battle in a European war in which Dutch, Danes, Germans, French and English all fought. It was the links between Spain and O'Neill and O'Donnell that led to the Plantation of Ulster. It was the French invasion of Ireland in 1798 that led to the Act of Union. There is no doubt historically that the British presence in Ireland was a presence to defend her own interests, both military and economic and to prevent Ireland being used as a back door by her European enemies. Indeed, to this very day the heart of the Provisional IRA campaign and the fundamental reasons given for it by the IRA are that Britain is in Ireland defending her interests by force.

All that has now changed. Both Britain and Ireland have now built and are continuing to develop new links with those same European countries. The world is now a smaller place. Sovereignty and independence, the issues at the heart of wars in Europe and the issues at the heart of the British-Irish quarrel have changed their meaning. The basic needs of all countries have led to shared sovereignty and interdependence as we move inevitably towards the United States of Europe and as we in Ireland rid ourselves of the obsession with Britain and rebuild our links with the rest of Europe.

Indeed with our identity of economic and cultural interests with many parts of that Europe we can become part of the European majority.

All of this is reflected in the new approach to British-Irish relationships dating from 1980 and leading to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the institutions of which - the Conference, the secretariat, the parliamentary tier - are all modelled exactly on the institutions of the European Community. None of that could have happened had the new European order not changed the roots and the nature of the British-Irish quarrel.

In recent times statements from leaders of Sinn Fein have given the impression that a serious debate is going on in their ranks about their methods and their objectives and they have indicated that they will not be found wanting if their statements are responded to. If all this is so, that debate should be encouraged towards the positive objective of ending all violence in Ireland. One way of encouraging such progress is to directly address their own stated reasons for what they call armed struggle and demonstrate that those reasons no longer exist.

There does remain one serious problem, a problem which is a direct consequence of our history and it is the deep division between the people who actually live on the island of Ireland. The Provisionals say that the people who are domiciled on the island of Ireland have the right to self-determination. What they do not seem to recognise is that those people are divided as to how that right is to be exercised and the search for agreement on how it is to be exercised cannot possibly be conducted by armed force. Here again if such agreements were to take the form of Irish unity the British government have made clear in Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement that they will not stand in the way. Irish unity is a matter for those Irish people who want it persuading those who do not. Are Sinn Fein and the IRA prepared to take up that challenge, lay down their arms and join in the difficult process of breaking down the barriers that actually divide the people of Ireland today? What is clear is that all the reasons that they give for their present method of dealing with the problems of Ireland no longer exist and this should be consistently pointed out particularly by the British Government.

As a beginning both governments should formally state that it is their intention to set up institutions in Ireland that will respect the identity and diversity of all the people of Ireland, that will allow them to work together in their common interests and to grow together over the generations at their own speed - and Protestants will still be Protestants and Catholics will still be Catholics and dissenters will still be dissenters. Once the poison of distrust is extracted from the relationships, that growth could be quite surprising.

None of this should threaten in any way the fundamental interests of the Unionist people because today our common interests are far more important than our differences. Our very existence in Ireland North or South and the economic interests which underpin it are virtually identical in today's world, as already reflected by the common approach in Europe to those interests by representatives from both parts of Ireland. That common interest

and approach can only intensify as the unity of Europe develops and unless we are successful the existence of our sons and daughters in Ireland, North or South will be threatened. They will emigrate.

Following such a declaration by both governments, all of the relationships and matters affecting them should go on the table for discussion with the objective not only of agreeing institutions that will give expression to those relationships but of ensuring that it is all done by dialogue and agreement. In the end, the agreement, setting up the institutions upon which we agree to work our common interests together and to preserve our identity and difference, should be put to the people, North and South, for their approval, requiring a majority in each part. That would reassure the Unionist people before we start that we mean what we say when we talk about agreement. And for Nationalists the agreement would not just require a mere majority of the Irish people but an overwhelming majority. Would that not be real self-determination?

In his speech to the European Parliament on European Political Union, the Irish President, Mr Charles Haughey asked that Europe eliminate division but preserve difference. Can we do the same in Ireland? Will humanity transcend nationality in every corner of Europe including its offshore island?