

The problem is about conflicting identities

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It is often easier in life to identify, and agree, a problem exists than to solve it. Fundamentally, the Northern Ireland problem has been one of conflicting identities between those who believe themselves British and those who believe themselves Irish. There are other aspects to this problem, but they are only a dimension of this central problem of conflicting national identities.

Throughout the talks process unionism is endeavouring to understand the nationalists' perspective. Sean Farren (SDLP) has recently expressed succinctly the nationalist viewpoint in that there is a fundamental need to give political expression to the identity of the nationalist tradition and its relationships with the rest of Ireland. He further asserts that, should this fundamental requirement not be met, the basis for a normal and stable society will not be established.

More generally, John Hume has often used the example of Europe as a model. He has indicated that the European Union is the greatest testament to the resolution of conflict and that Europeans are now engaged in a level of co-operation so intense that it has blurred the traditional bounds of sovereignty and notions of territorial integrity. He advocates that the same process should happen within the island of Ireland.

Unionism can readily accept that borders have become blurred by the pooling of sovereignty among the 15 EU nations. Since Ireland and the United Kingdom are both EU members, this situation already exists within the island of Ireland.

If John Hume wishes for this EU co-operation to be extended, then a more logical position would be its extension to the British/Irish Isles dimension, in a balanced and equal manner, and not primarily within the island of Ireland.

However, to compare the dynamics that have operated, and continue to operate, among the EU states with a political process designed to achieve a 'New Ireland' is taking the 'European model' too far.

The European model is not about sovereign states (UK and Ireland) facilitating and encouraging a region of one state (Northern Ireland) to agree to political institutions aimed at incorporating that region into the neighbouring State: all this against a background of terrorist violence aimed at the same outcome. Such a process is anathema in the modern democratic Europe.

Unionism has a different perspective as to how the 'European model' applies to the Northern Ireland problem. Indeed, we are not alone: there are many other European states which are wrestling with conflicting national identities. The mind perhaps turns immediately to the former Yugoslavia, but national identity conflicts also exist, for example, in Slovakia, Romania, the Baltic countries and, for a long period, in Italy. The problems of Northern Ireland clearly are not unique within Europe.

Democrats throughout Europe accept that the foundations for peace, justice and a normal, stable society are best maintained by effective democracy and a common understanding and observance of human rights. In practice - and for new countries wishing to be considered for membership - the following principles are applied by the European Union.

- Where there is aggressive nationalism the EU expects current borders to be respected by way of the institutions of government: disagreements are to be settled by arbitration.
- Where there is dissension within a region of a state regarding the validity of that state, autonomous regional government is developed and arrangements are expected to be created within that state in order to protect all ethnic groupings.
- Where there is tension and a lack of trust across borders within Europe, co-operation is encouraged and expected to be built up slowly from the base of already existing, and functioning, regional government.
- Where there are states that have an ethnic affinity with a group of people in a neighbouring state, their only interest is to ensure their kin flourish under conditions of good government in that neighbouring state, not to have a say in its government.

These fundamental democratic rights and freedoms are being applied both fairly and equally, on the same footing and with the same emphasis, elsewhere in modern Europe, but not in Northern Ireland.

For example, in Northern Ireland there is strong support for regional all-party government, but this has been long denied unless unionists agree to all-Ireland institutions with governmental powers.

Also, trust will not be built by trying to create all-Ireland political executive bodies that do not have the support of the Northern Ireland majority. In all other areas in Europe where cross-border tensions exist, the principles applied bear no resemblance at all to the governments' approach in Northern Ireland.

All parties to the Talks have indicated the central importance of human rights. The above European principles were explained in detail within the Talks process by the Ulster Unionist Party. We wish Irish nationalism to support a real, genuine and honourable accommodation based on these widely accepted principles. The Irish Government could play a leading role in finding this honourable accommodation.

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