

# Open Letter to the Secretary of State

Belfast Telegraph - 25<sup>th</sup> September 2006

Dear Secretary of State,

You recently spoke at the British Irish Association, focusing on unionism. I feel I must respond. I am sure your words were all carefully chosen but they do not reflect my view of unionism.

You said it was not easy to understand “the lingering sense of insecurity which runs deep in the unionist community.” You mentioned some things that should relieve this insecurity such as: the “principle of consent” and “the physical force tradition in mainstream republicanism has, belatedly, come to an end.”

You admitted that assurances “from British Secretaries of State have a tendency to be counter productive.” You’re right and I’ll tell you why. I am not insecure about my own unionist position within modern liberal democratic values but I do have a concern that you, on behalf of the Government, lack a clear moral and political compass when it comes to Northern Ireland, since you do not follow democratic standards.

At this stage - using your words - you’ll probably dismiss me as “trapped in old hatreds nor up to new challenges.” If that’s the case then I need to explain further.

You believe unionism has misread “Northern Ireland’s place in the modern world” and that we cannot proceed if we remain insulated from that development. You add “we are not immune from global events” and “Northern Ireland is not unique, as some like to think.” (I presume ‘some’ refers to unionism?) You mentioned other conflicts such as the Basque region and the Middle East.

What a turnaround in Government’s attitude. Mr Hain, until this recent speech of yours, the Government’s attitude was that Northern Ireland was indeed unique and, as a consequence, needed a unique solution.

You’re right. We’re not alone: there are many other countries which wrestle with conflicting national identities. Unlike Government, I have never viewed our problem as unique: I have stated this publicly many times.

I note that Sinn Fein’s position is the same as yours. Gerry Adams, while visiting the Middle East recently and comparing it with Northern Ireland, stated “there are key conflict resolution principles” and these include “respect for human rights and international law.” What’s new, Mr Hain? Sinn Fein and the Government singing from the same hymn sheet! Unionism isn’t fooled. By bringing up global politics and a rights agenda, Sinn Fein gives the impression of being both modern and moderate. Yet at the very core of its policy is a form of aggressive nationalism that has long been rejected by modern democracies.

And you, Mr Hain, by accepting Sinn Fein's refusal to recognise the policing institutions, are ignoring democratic standards, to which you are supposedly committed, while contributing significantly to the lack of political progress here.

The right of Sinn Fein to be in government carries with it, by way of international standards, the responsibility to demonstrate absolute commitment to democratic values. This requires acceptance of the legitimacy and authority of the state, including its police. Acceptance now, not at some vague future date, and not at the price of sacrifice of principle and betrayal of promise.

Let me be positive: our problem is solvable but what threatens to make it unsolvable is for you to still believe that Northern Ireland is unique (though you imply otherwise) and that the problem can be tackled only by advocating a fudge concerning international democratic standards. I fully understand people's deep disillusionment with politics reflected by issues like rates and water charges. But these issues reflect symptoms and are not the cause of our problem - the lack of local democratic accountability.

Returning to your global dimension, the Prime Minister has stated that what the people in the Middle East want: "is progress towards democracy, liberty, human rights, the same as the rest of us." He added: "It's important that the will of the international community is obeyed."

My question is simple. Since commitments to international standards of human rights and democracy are clearly at the heart of the Government's foreign policy, how much greater is its responsibility to ensure that these are honoured within the United Kingdom itself?

You said recently about MLAs: "It will be them that walk away, not us." Who is it that is walking away from their obligations? I invite you to consider fully the international community's standards for resolving our problem, to which the Government is committed to implementing, and then consider, is it unionism that will cause Northern Ireland to become a political failure?

**Dermot Nesbitt**