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GETTING BEYOND THE MENTALITY OF APARTHEID TO BUILD A NEW IRELAND

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The walls of Belfast are one of the worst symbols of the past 28 years of trouble in Northern Ireland. In one of the highest church-going cities in Europe, it has been necessary to build 13 walls to separate and protect one section of a Christian people from another. Love thy neighbor?

Those walls are an indictment of all of us. They scream at us that our past attitudes have built them. If those walls are to be removed, thereby symbolizing that we have at last reached agreement on how to share a piece of earth together with respect for our differences, both sides in the North must be prepared to reexamine their past attitudes.

There are two mindsets, Nationalist and Unionist, which go to the heart of those attitudes, and both must change. It is easy to point at and blame the other side, and we are all very good at that. But real progress will be made if each side reexamines its own mindset.

The Nationalist mindset, in simple terms, is territorial: Ireland is our land, our country, and the Unionist minority cannot stop us from uniting. What we have to recognize is that it is people who have rights, not territory, and that it is our people who are divided, not our land. They can therefore only be brought together by agreement and not by coercion. That being the case, the proper strategy to achieve lasting peace and stability in Ireland must be to get all energies devoted to promoting that agreement. In practice, that means both governments and all parties working together.

The fact that we have now arrived at that stage means that considerable progress has been made, even though considerable obstacles remain. The progress can be measured by casting our minds back 10 years. Who would have thought then that the British and Irish governments, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, Loyalist parties, Alliance, a Women's Coalition, and the Social Democratic and Labor Party would be sitting in the same room in Belfast under international chairs in a talks process designed to address all the relationships that make up our problem, designed to be comprehensive in its agenda, and designed to be inclusive? That progress in itself should be enough to persuade the IRA to lay down its arms so that Sinn Fein can join us.

We must of course keep stressing to the Unionist people that our objective is an agreement that will respect the legitimate rights and identity of both our traditions -- no more and no less. Victory for either side over the other will not solve our problem. Lasting stability in any society, particularly a divided society, can be based only on institutions of government that have loyalty of all sections of the people.

We in the SDLP, since our very foundation, have been heavily involved in promoting fundamental debate within what is known as the Nationalist tradition, North and South. We were founded out of the Civil Rights Movement, and our central principle, written into our constitution from day one, was that it was the people of Ireland who were divided, and they could be brought together by agreement. All the other parties born out of the Irish Civil War

maintained a simplistic view throughout most of this century, and it was a natural antipartition view that a united Ireland was the answer. How it was to be achieved was never spelled out.

Indeed, the Dail in 1949 passed a unanimous resolution that in essence supported British withdrawal and a united Ireland. All parties in the Dail, arising out of the debate and the experience of the past 28 years and not least as a result of the work of the New Ireland Forum, are now totally committed to the principle of agreement and consent among our divided people.

Sinn Fein was the last remaining party tied to the narrow territorial approach, and indeed it was central to the IRA philosophy. That whole question, the reasons given by the IRA for the use of physical force, has been central to the dialogue between the SDLP and Sinn Fein, which began publicly in 1988 and continued privately between Gerry Adams and myself. Indeed, if the public record of those 1988 talks is studied, the central issues and purpose of that dialogue is clear. We asked Sinn Fein to state its reasons for the support of armed struggle -- in fact, the reasons for IRA violence.

The answer was the traditional one: The "British" are in Ireland defending their interests by force, and therefore we have the right to use force to put them out. The second reason was that the British are preventing the Irish people from exercising their right to self-determination.

Our response was that the Irish people have the right to self-determination, but they are divided as to how the right is to be exercised. Therefore, it is agreement that is required, and that could not be brought about by force. Secondly, we argued that while in the past the British did have an interest in having a presence in Ireland, that was no longer true in today's new Europe. The legacy of the past, which is today's problem, was that we were a divided people with separate identities; again the approach would have to be an agreement that would respect the rights of both sections of our community. Essentially, Sinn Fein's response was to ask us to prove what we were saying. In essence the Hume/Adams documentation was an agreed proposed joint declaration by both governments, setting out these principles. This led to the Downing Street declaration and to the cease-fire.

Unfortunately the Unionists do not seem to have noticed the debate in Nationalist ranks, or indeed the change in mindset that has taken place. When Albert Reynolds, Gerry Adams, and myself issued a statement making clear that our problem could not be solved without the agreement and participation of the Unionist people, they did not even notice the significance of the statement. They objected to the meeting.

The Unionist mindset has not changed. Their mindset, the seige mentality plus the Afrikaaner mindset, is basically that the only way to protect themselves is to hold all power in their own hands and exclude anyone who is not one of them. That, as we know, can only lead to widespread discrimination and conflict. Our fundamental request to the Unionist people is that they study seriously what has been happening in Nationalist Ireland and have faith in their own geography and numbers. No solution can be imposed on them; it can only be achieved with their agreement. They should therefore come to the table to negotiate and make that agreement. They can ensure that their identity is permanently protected in mutual accommodation and not crudely asserted in exclusive and majoritarian terms.

Indeed, if we make such an agreement that respects both identities, our quarrel will be over, and when we start working together in our substantial common interests, the real healing process will begin. The border in Ireland is not a line in a map. It is in the minds and hearts of people, and that cannot be removed in an instant political package. But once we start working together and the old prejudices and distrusts are gradually eroded, the New Ireland will evolve. Its model will probably be very different from the traditional models of the past, because it will evolve by agreement and with respect for diversity.

In such an atmosphere, we can also harness the diaspora of both traditions. Today's world is much smaller than the world in which our ancestors emigrated from Ireland. By moving beyond narrow territorial mindsets, we can link the peoples of the diaspora to this island in broader and more global definitions of identity. In so doing, we can become one of the most powerful peoples in the world. Working together we can harness the enormous influence of the Irish diaspora, economic and political.

Let us move away from the "dying for Ireland" syndrome of patriotism. Let us live for Ireland. Let us spill our sweat and not our blood in the next century.