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Measures to encourage Mutual Understanding

Analysis of Misconceptions

1. Relations between the peoples of the United Kingdom and Republic are clouded by a variety of mutual misconceptions. These misconceptions range from those which result from factual ignorance though those which repose on out-dated knowledge of affairs in the other country to those which consist of attitudes, possibly exaggerated or prejudiced, towards undeniable facts. These misconceptions hinder the development of a close and friendly relationship, and this is recognised by those who have an interest in perpetrating and deepening them.

2. In both countries, the nature and seriousness of misconceptions vary widely between different sectors of the population. In the United Kingdom the most important distinction is that existing between misconceptions held in Great Britain and those held by the Protestant Community in Northern Ireland. In Ireland the broadly similar attitudes and aspirations of the people of the Republic and the Catholic community in Northern Ireland mean that the dividing line, in regard to the problem of mutual misconceptions, falls between Unionists and Nationalists rather than between Northern Ireland and the Republic. (Reference to Catholic and Protestant communities does not exclude recognition that not all Catholics are nationalist or Protestants unionist).

3. As between Great Britain and Ireland, mutual knowledge does not appear to be balanced, reflecting the difference in size between the two countries and the corresponding place which each holds in the preoccupations of the other. There has been and continues to be frequent personal contact very often involving long periods of residence or permanent settlement on the part of Irish people in Britain and vice versa. However the proportion of the British population involved in such movement remains inevitably smaller than the proportion of the Irish people having direct knowledge of life in Britain. The British media also achieve far greater penetration in the Republic than its media do in any part of the United Kingdom. The consequence is that Irishmen in general have perhaps a fuller notion of the realities of British politics and society than is prevalent amongst British people in regard to life and attitudes in the other island. While the problem may be more one of a lack of conception than of misconception, it is probable that awareness of a common language and of institutional similarities in the Republic leads some British people to overlook the more fundamental differences, for instance in cultural matters and in political and legal systems, which in fact exist. In this way the very familiarity which our shared history has brought about can produce misleading assumptions. It should conversely be observed that for historic reasons the origin of those many aspects of Irish political philosophy and practice which have been derived from British example is seldom openly acknowledged in Ireland.
4. As between Northern Ireland and the Republic, a complex of sharply contrasting conceptions exists. On the fundamental political question of the maintenance of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, Northern Unionists regard the Republic's "claim" to the Northern counties as a significant hindrance to mutual understanding. They believe that politicians in the Republic have little concern or understanding for the position of Unionists and they feel that the depth of their attachment to the Union is misunderstood in the South. Gravely preoccupied by their security position,

Unionists feel that the fact that terrorists who have committed crimes in Northern Ireland should be able to avoid extradition from the Republic by pleading that their crimes are political is hardly explicable except in terms of sympathy with subversive groups.

5. On the nationalist side the basic view is that the division of Ireland did not resolve the Irish question which remains entire though now transferred to and encapsulated within Northern Ireland. This view underlies the aspiration to national unity through reconciliation and by consent. There is a general perception in the Republic that the Northern Unionist majority has not made consistent or spontaneous efforts to understand or deal with the grievances of the minority in Northern Ireland and that the effects of past discrimination have not been eliminated. This perception outweighs respect for the Northern Protestants' commitment to the Union. Public opinion in the Republic is concerned about the threat to security posed by subversive groups and approves the full range of measures both preventive and judicial which the authorities have taken to meet it but is influenced in considering the security position in Northern Ireland by the evidence occasionally presented of discriminatory actions by the security forces there.
6. On the question of religious and cultural attitudes, mutual perceptions respond to one another. The Northern Protestant believes that there is prejudice in the Republic against Protestants, and refers to the decline in the Protestant population there, to the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to inter-confessional marriages and to the influence of that Church's doctrines on the Republic's laws on divorce and contraception. The Irish Roman Catholic believes that denominational prejudice partly underlies the discrimination formerly practised against and attitudes still prevailing towards the minority community in Northern Ireland. He cites also the active involvement of Protestant ministers of religion in Northern politics and their insistence on different legal arrangements in Northern Ireland covering abortion and homosexuality to those in force in Britain. It must be added that the Northern Protestant also sees Gaelic culture and the republican form of constitution and government as threatening his way of life.

The statutory guarantee of Northern Ireland's position is also a source of misunderstandings. As Northern Unionists see it, Irish nationalists suppose that this guarantee is the key obstacle to Irish unity, and that but for it Northern Protestants would be ready to "join the South". Unionists reject such a supposition. In the Republic, while the guarantee itself is not challenged and is regarded as a statement of fact, the constant repetition of the guarantee formula by the British Government to political groups which sometimes appear to be actively opposing its policies is not understood. This use of the guarantee is seen as having a negative effect and it is felt that the formula should be accompanied by a compensating call for reconciliation and compromise which the divided society of Northern Ireland requires.

8. A variety of misconceptions relating both to public attitudes and to Government policies thus seems to exist. As between Britain and the Republic the problem might be answered by a straightforward series of measures to increase each people's knowledge of the other country. As between Northern Ireland and the Republic the problem goes deeper and measures would have to be more far-reaching. Both Governments should have to concern themselves with institutional arrangements, increased contacts and joint endeavours, as well as intensified information exchanges, if progress is to be registered.

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