

SDLP and the New Republicanism

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To break the connection with England...and to assert the independence of my country - these were my objects. To...substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter - these were my means.

The two essential tenets of Irish Republicanism to unite Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter in the common name of Irishman and to break the connection with England, have persisted as potent motivators of political engagement in Ireland ever since they were first expressed by Wolfe Tone.

The sheer simplicity and indeed nobility of the first has enabled almost all political parties within what we regard as the Irish nationalist tradition to deem themselves republicans. So it is that parties including Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour, the PDs and the SDLP as well as parties like Sinn Fein, Republican Sinn Fein and other smaller groups, all subscribe to the aim of uniting Irish men and women in a separate Irish state embracing the whole of Ireland.

The one other element that can be said to be common to all is a commitment to basic human rights, as understood in their general development since the French revolution. As a result, the constitutional framework of the South lies essentially within the wider European tradition of democratic republicanism from where the fathers of Irish Republicanism found much of their inspiration.

Beyond the core tenets those who proclaim themselves republicans may or may not share social and economic perspectives, may or may not share positions on how to vindicate particular human, civil or cultural rights, or how to order church-state relationships, for example. Indeed they demonstrably haven't shared positions on such matters over the course of our history both before and after 1921.

On a political spectrum marking such perspectives people and parties proclaiming these core tenets can be found all along that spectrum, from the most conservative to the most radical leftwing position. The SDLP would place itself amongst those who regard themselves as social democrats and so find common cause with those in

labour, social democratic and some socialist parties. Indeed since our foundation we have been members of the Socialist International and since its foundation of the PES.

It is difficult not to conclude that Irish Republicanism does not necessarily entail a single comprehensive political agenda. Republicanism in our context is, therefore, not so much an all-embracing political ideology as the statement of a preference for a particular constitutional style and that it be separate from Britain – the former being government by the people from whom all power and authority derive, the latter being an independent Irish state embracing the people of the whole of Ireland.

While these tenets are common across most of our political parties, unionists excepted of course (although we have to careful not to ignore the republicanism implicit within the contractual relationship with the crown which informs some unionist thinking and enunciated from time to time by, among others, Ian Paisley), those holding these tenets have differed profoundly about the means to those ends, especially when related to how a united Ireland is to be brought about. It has been these differences which have marked the deep divides between those who proclaim the republican ideal.

Historically, these differences arose from the fundamental failure to comprehensively answer the ‘how’ question associated with the aim of uniting Irish people of the different traditions implied by Tone’s reference to ‘Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter’.

Traditionally that question had been answered quite simply by the second of the two tenets of Republicanism ‘to break the connection with England’. The result until fairly recently was to invest all republican efforts, political and military, into trying to persuade the English/British, to withdraw from Ireland, and hardly any effort into *how* we unite the people of our different political and religious allegiances.

As we know, the issue has never been straightforward. Treating it as such has resulted not in the unity advocated by Tone but rather the forced withdrawal of the British from twenty-six of the thirty two counties and, more tragically in terms of relationships within this island, two civil wars. The first, in 1922-23, was a civil strife

that blighted relationships in the South for several decades and sidelined the North where the 'how' question was and still is at its most acute – rhetorical consideration aside. The second, in the North itself lasted for two and a half decades from the end of the 1960s where its bitter sectarian and undemocratic dimensions completely undermined any claim, from a republican perspective, that it was a war of liberation.

In so many respects that strife only underlined in the most tragic ways possible the failure to adequately answer the 'how' question. Killing in a most calculated way those with whom republican rhetoric claimed it was the very aim to unite, and on the scale that it happened was such a contradiction that it is impossible to argue that it was republican ideals and not more deep rooted sectarian antipathies that drove that campaign.

How else do we explain the killing of a congregation at prayer in a rural mission hall, the killing of workers travelling home at the end of a week, the killing of members of the Orange Order gathered for an evening's meeting, or of a community gathering to commemorate its war dead?

How else do we explain the destruction of work places owned by Irish people of a different political tradition but that those responsible for the destruction were motivated by feelings totally incompatible with the core tenet of Tone's republicanism?

How else do we explain such other forms of behaviour as attacks on homes of unionists, or the verbal abuse directed against those of the unionist tradition by people who are members of or supporters of parties that subscribe to the republican ideal?

Sectarianism evocative of eighteenth century defenderism has been a more potent influence informing the behaviour of many in the North who outwardly subscribe to Tone's aspiration, than latter day republicans of all shades have ever been prepared to admit. In the North, sectarianism festered in the unresolved relationships between Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter and in times of high tension became quite capable of perpetrating the kind of deeds I have just recalled.

To argue that such actions have been responses to the sectarianism of others or that as Irish those attacked suffered because had no right to express allegiance to the British crown, are hardly acceptable explanations and again only underline the failure to answer the ‘how’ question about Irish unity.

Of course, not all who subscribed to the republican ideal supported a military approach. Following the pain of partition and its immediate aftermath, the majority, North and South, did not believe that further violent campaigns, however much directed at forcing the British to finally withdraw from Ireland, could lead to unity. Rather they believed violence would only sow further division and delay the attainment of unity. But for far too long they offered no real alternative apart from empty rhetoric. Not having a substantial, viable alternative they left an opening to those who advocated and organised the violent approach.

It was not until in the aftermath of the civil rights campaign when the concepts of cross-community partnership and power-sharing began to take political root in Northern Ireland did the beginnings of a realistic alternative take shape. Advanced mainly by John Hume and his SDLP colleagues these concepts gradually gained wider endorsement especially in the New Ireland Forum (1983-84).

Partnership and power-sharing were proposed not just as the basis for developing more positive relationships between the nationalist and unionist communities within Northern Ireland, but since they always had an all-Ireland dimension, they were intended to signal a new basis to all-island relationship as well. That dimension, from the SDLP’s perspective as seen as capable of growth and development towards ultimate unity.

When first enunciated these ideas were not welcomed by militant republicans by then deeply committed to their campaign of violence. To such republicans these ideas were regarded as a betrayal of true republicanism. Expelling the British remained their primary objective. Building relationships with Irish men and women who had opted for continued membership of the UK, was secondary and for when British withdrawal would take place, never an essential prerequisite.

I don't need to detail the story except to say that it was the former, the bridge-building, power-sharing, partnership approach that gained the most popular appeal and so became the only positive and realistic approach that could be adopted. Hence the ceasefires and the whole process of negotiation leading to the Good Friday Agreement.

That agreement is a profoundly republican agreement. It does not provide the full realisation of the republican goal of an independent Irish state but it does contain the potential for its full realisation. It is also profoundly republican in a more fundamental way. Its core principle is the principle of consent which roots the Agreement in the sovereignty of the Irish people. That sovereignty was solemnly expressed in the joint referenda of May 1998 and will again be invoked whenever the constitutional status of Northern Ireland is to be determined.

Fundamentally, the Agreement delivers for the first time in our history the essential ingredient of a united Ireland, agreement. Without agreement there can be no unity. Hence unity will be by agreement and not by imposition. I am reminded that in Irish the term for united Ireland is *Eire Aontaithe* which is also the term for an Agreed Ireland.

Agreed on the means we are also agreed on the basic characteristics of a united Ireland because the GFA enshrines the essential democratic values of a united Ireland - respect for our diverse traditions, respect for human rights and firm commitments to equality for all, values traditionally associated with true republicanism.

It will, therefore, be through working the practical political, social and economic opportunities presented by the agreement that fears will be allayed, confidence and trust developed between individuals and communities on all sides in the North and on an all-Ireland basis. The partnership based Assembly and its Executive, NSMC, the implementation bodies, the potential which the North-South Parliamentary Forum provides, the North-South Civic Forum, all provide answers to the 'how' question about unity. Each requires unionist and nationalist, i.e. Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter to work together, if not under the common label of Irish, at least as joint representatives of those constituencies.

The question then is - are all parties sharing this goal prepared to make clear that the Agreement will continue no matter what the constitutional status of the North? The distinct and inclusive regional government arrangements, proportionality, cross-community protections, equality commitments and human rights safeguards which exist in the North while we are in the UK will at least equally apply in the united Ireland we seek to achieve by democratic consent as provided for by the Agreement.

Implicit in what has just been said is that the quality and depth of the unity to which we aspire cannot be achieved by republicans alone or in isolation from unionism. So, lecturing unionists about their need to prepare for unity or about much better off they would be, politically and economically, as some republicans have a habit of doing, will hardly achieve that goal.

The Good Friday Agreement creates new political givens which allow all shades of republicanism and nationalism to articulate themselves in new ways and to participate at new levels. But the same it must be said applies to unionism. So are we prepared for a new competition between Irish republicanism and Irish unionism in which each accepts that whatever the outcome there will be mutual assurance instead of mutual attrition? The Agreement and the nature of its validation mean that we can underwrite each other's legitimacy and underwrite shared institutions instead of undermining each other's legitimacy and cherished aspirations.

Twenty-first century Irish republicanism must not be allowed ever again to be used as a synonym for a narrow nationalism. Rather it must be a by-word for the relentless pursuit of equality, for the defence of social justice and the promotion of unity, peacefully and by democratic consent.

I believe with Agreement's framework now so solemnly endorsed there is a clear responsibility on all to work within it and, for those who are republicans, to use the opportunities it presents to lay the basis for a real and enduring unity not through threatening rhetoric but should regarding the Agreement as a living agreement capable of change and development according to circumstances. It is already having

to face that challenge in the course of the current review and faced with the desire of the DUP to put its stamp on the political way forward.