

1916, the Good Friday Agreement and National Reconciliation

As we approach the hundredth anniversary of the 1916 Rising in 2016 there is a compelling case for making the next decade one dedicated to national reconciliation. The years ahead will be marked by events and debates commemorating the Rising and its huge impact on our history. The temptation will be to concentrate on the events and the policies which drove them rather than focusing on the lessons to be drawn for 21st century Ireland.

Already political parties are claiming the 1916 mantle, or as much as will not allow others to claim an exclusive right to wear it. In claiming that mantle the phrase “cherishing all of the children of the nation equally.” will be frequently quoted from the Proclamation made by the Rising’s leaders. It will be quoted in support of policies seen to realise that principle in today’s Ireland. Or it will be quoted in criticism of other policies because they are not seen to realise it. It will also be quoted together with the rest of the same sentence - “and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past” - to try to reassure unionists that Irish unity will really mean cherishing them, not just individually but as a community as worthy of respect and honour as any other.

Given the divisions that still exist between nationalists and unionists would it not be appropriate also to reflect on how the vision of an Ireland diverse in its traditions and allegiances may yet be reconciled and eventually united? Across the whole of Ireland the opportunity should be grasped to ask how 21st century Ireland should cherish equally all the children of the nation – our new citizens as well as those with deeper roots.

However, if those of us who are asking how Irish unity should be promoted today are really serious in addressing that question positively and comprehensively, we will need to turn for answers not just in the vision proposed by the leaders of the Rising but to more recent developments, notably the Good Friday Agreement. While those leaders gave to their own and later generations considerable

inspiration, they had a 'blind spot' as to what 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally' would have to mean if a truly united and independent Ireland was to be established.

While the Rising's leaders were well aware of the sharp division between nationalists and unionists, the fact is they all seriously underestimated the scale of its implications for Ireland's future. As a result the Rising took place as if its impact on the 'minority divided from the majority' would be of little consequence.

Amongst the leaders Connolly and Pearse were undoubtedly the deepest political thinkers. Connolly had direct experience of living amongst and of working with men and women of unionist views. He spent several years as a trade union leader in Belfast, mobilising and organising workers in the city and elsewhere in the North to demand and defend their rights. Pearse on the other hand does not appear to have had much direct experience of the unionist community apart from that section of it living in Dublin.

But neither Connolly or Pearse or indeed any other of the leaders who wrote about Irish freedom showed any real understanding of the depth of feeling that underlay the unionist position, especially that of northern unionists. Despite several lengthy articles devoted to the 'Ulster' question Connolly scathingly dismissed unionist politics as essentially backward. He described labour leaders who expressed a unionist outlook as profoundly misguided. Mainstream unionist leaders he regarded as tools of British imperialism. They were certainly that but to say that that was all they were was to ignore the depth of commitment to the unionist cause that would have included rebellion against the Empire, if deemed necessary. Pearse's most famous reference to unionism was that in arming the Ulster Volunteer Movement an example had been set which nationalists should emulate.

None of the leaders of the Rising considered what it was in nationalism that unionists found objectionable, especially the very close links between nationalist leaders and the Catholic Church in the early 20th century. They ignored the

issue of what needed to be addressed if unity was to be preserved and an independent Ireland presented as inclusive of all traditions.

That the Rising's leaders underestimated the strength of unionism and the challenge it posed to the case for Irish independence, is not to say anything unique about their political thinking. The long established nationalist focus on how Britain could be either persuaded or forced to grant independence, seldom addressed the 'northern' question, except to dismiss it as an unruly nuisance. The question was not treated as a substantial issue capable of determining the kind of independence that Ireland could and should achieve. In so far as the unionist position had to be addressed, nationalists regarded it as one for a post-independence agenda.

This widely shared thinking within nationalism persisted until some realised that the question would eventually have to be addressed directly and positively. But that realisation only really began to dawn when four years after the Rising partition exploded any immediate prospects for an *independent* and *united* country. It was a position that persisted with tragic consequences within republican circles long after 1921. Amongst extreme republicans it was only fully acknowledged as untenable in the Good Friday Agreement.

The Agreement marked a turning point in relationships between nationalists and unionists. A turning point as momentous for this and future generations as the Rising was for earlier generations. The Agreement marked, for the first time ever, a coming together of unionists and nationalists to agree a common set of principles regarding their constitutional relationships including arrangements regarding how those relationships should be managed in shared institutions on a day-to-day basis. Instead of being oblivious to 'the differences ... that divided a minority from the majority' the Agreement faces up to those differences, acknowledges them and offers to accommodate the people who hold those differences in an Ireland in which all can feel comfortable.

In doing so the Agreement acknowledges the present constitutional arrangement that keeps Northern Ireland within the UK, but clearly allows for constitutional

change paving the way towards unity. The Agreement enshrines the primacy of democratic, peaceful persuasion as the only means capable of achieving that goal. The Agreement rejects violence as a futile means towards this end. It commits its signatories to a process of dialogue to resolve political problems within a framework that respects the identities, aspirations and allegiances of all.

Despite this some argue that a United Ireland can be brought about simply by 'non-violent' forms of coercion: demographic coercion, i.e. a crude sectarian (Catholic) majority assumed to favour unity. Others argue that continuous and unrelenting pressure will gradually wear down unionist opposition. The first is a means of avoiding the hard questions regarding relationships with the unionist community. It can almost certainly be ruled out as unlikely to ever happen in the manner imagined. The Good Friday Agreement implicitly rules the second undemocratic. Moreover, it is clear that neither has the remotest prospect of achieving unity any time soon. Nor could either ever deliver stability.

A united Ireland that will truly cherish all equally will, if it is to be achieved, require genuine and honest non-coercive persuasion of a significant section of the unionist people and the reassurance of others. In working towards this goal, nationalism must engage with unionism much more than it does at present, not because the numbers tell us we must, but because our desire for a peaceful future on this island as equals and as partners, tells us we should.

The Agreement does not make unionists nationalists in waiting. What it does allow is a peaceful competition of ideas between unionism and nationalism while also bringing unionists and nationalists to work together to make a better society for us all. Therefore, those who lecture unionists about their need to prepare for re-unification have to accept that it is not just through words but actions as well that unity will be achieved. It is futile talking in high-minded language about unity while at the same time engaging in the sort of underhand actions that put unionists off even the Good Friday Agreement, never mind the idea of a united Ireland.

The Agreement's principles are not temporary, tactical, or transitional. Rather, they offer a covenant of honour between nationalists and unionists that should

and indeed must endure in the interests of peace and stability. For unionist political leaders to try to “smash the Agreement” could hardly be in their own long-term interests. Such an attempt would mean freezing their relationships with the nationalist community, not just in the North but throughout Ireland.

Indeed, the Agreement’s all-Ireland agenda is explicitly underpinned by this concern to address the common interests of all. It does not pretend that North-South cooperation is a staging post on the road to unity. It is, however, a real hope that by working together, people and their communities North and South will overcome the legacy of suspicion left by the Troubles and progress to ever-closer relationships.

Of critical importance in this regard will be the opportunities for political engagement which another of the Agreement’s provisions, the North-South Parliamentary would provide. This forum would bring politicians from the Oireachtas and the Northern Assembly into regular contact thus getting to know and understand each other and, thereby provide a common leadership to real reconciliation in Ireland.

Commemorating the Rising will entail a great deal of looking back to examine its events and the policies that drove them. To do so in an uncritical way would be, to say the least, unfortunate. But to do so without an eye to the lessons to be learnt and without a commitment to building a future in which all will be truly reconciled and cherished would be tragic.

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