

'Eire aontaithe' is the Irish phrase meaning *united Ireland*. Significantly, for those whose concern for Irish unity goes beyond the rhetoric of 'Brits out' and majoritarian imposition, the phrase also means *agreed Ireland*. In one word the Irish language summarises what those of us for whom a united Ireland is a political objective, believe must be the essence of that unity, i.e. *agreement* – agreement between the people of the different political traditions who will live in that united Ireland.

Without sufficient agreement to sustain whatever might be the political institutions of a united Ireland, such an Ireland will not come into existence and, if somehow it could be forced into existence, it would not persist. This fundamental requirement being, I believe, self-evident the only road to achieving a really united Ireland, an *Eire aontaithe*, is to create the conditions in which that sufficiency of agreement will exist.

In all the years before partition and since mere sloganising about Irish unity brought us nowhere close to its achievement. Much less did successive campaigns of violence achieve progress in that direction. Sloganising convinced no one about the value of a unity between 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter'. Sloganising merely maintained traditional divisions to which violence added tragedy and bitterness and the sad experience of our communities being torn apart and set at each other throats.

An agreed, united Ireland is the SDLP's philosophy and has been from the party's foundation. It was reflected in the party's constitution, drawn up in 1970, which emphasised that Irish unity must be based on the principle of consent. In other words, Irish unity could only be achieved with the consent of a majority of the people living in Northern Ireland.

This very principle is at the heart of the Good Friday agreement, an agreement endorsed by an overwhelming majority of the people of Ireland. All major political parties within the nationalist tradition in Ireland, SDLP, Sinn Fein, Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour and the Progressive Democrats, now accept this same principle and the approach to unity predicated upon it.

While this principle had been accepted by some of these parties for some considerable time, it was not until the SDLP had been instrumental in convening the New Ireland Forum in 1983 that the principle was comprehensively and jointly endorsed by the majority of parties within the nationalist tradition. It took a further fifteen years before Sinn Fein, which had denounced the New Ireland Forum, to come round to accepting the principle of consent. This it did when Sinn Fein endorsed the Good Friday agreement and, by clear implication, renounced support for the physical force tradition. In effect Sinn Fein then joined the rest of nationalist Ireland in saying that it too wanted to work to create the conditions whereby Irish unity would only be achieved through peaceful, democratic means.

The practical outworking of the principle of consent is to be seen in the partnership arrangements provided by the Good Friday agreement. These arrangements provide the means whereby Irish women and Irish men of the unionist and nationalist traditions can work together in partnership to the mutual benefit of the people they represent.

Most notable amongst those means is the North-South Ministerial Council which is developing programmes in a wide range of economic, social and cultural sectors affecting communities throughout the whole of Ireland. Bringing, as it does, representatives of the people of the whole of Ireland together to devise such programmes it provides a potent means of breaking down barriers, of removing misconceptions and of creating the basis for even closer co-operation and agreement between Irish people.

Many of the programmes being developed are still in their infancy but from direct experience of the working of several of the sectors within the North-South Council, I am confident that as they take effect these programmes will achieve much more than their specific objectives. They will create a greater sense of mutual understanding and trust, ingredients essential to an agreed Ireland.

The scale of the challenge in developing trust is daily reinforced by the persistence of sectarianism and its crude manifestations on the streets of our cities and towns. Sloganising about Irish unity will not, *pace* Jude Collins et al, eliminate sectarianism no matter how wonderful an image of such an Ireland might be presented.

Armchair commentators may find consolation in slogans but those who are serious about their politics recognise that only by taking jackets off and rolling up sleeves to meet the challenge of real community building and addressing the immediate needs of all our people, will the conditions for a more hopeful future be established. Also, it is only in such circumstances that the conditions will be created for an Ireland that is not only united but also agreed, a real Eire Aontaithe.

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