

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME?

A Discussion Article

It has often been stated that if the cause of Irish unity is to be advanced (for unionists in particular and people in general in Ireland and in Britain), specifics need to be spelled out more of what the content of such unity will be.

It is understandable that the parties that are likely to be engaged in negotiations about the shape of Irish unity (if there is a positive nationalist result from a border poll) are unwilling to commit themselves to too much detail at this stage.

However, it could be helpful if political commentators and analysts made an effort to suggest models in order to encourage debate.

STRUCTURES OF GOVERNANCE

The first consideration which is likely to arise is that of the system of governance on the island. Various scenarios have been looked at in the past, but in a somewhat abstract manner. A more concrete approach would be to examine what might be built upon existing structures.

The Good Friday Agreement provided for a number of structures.

First of all, there is a Legislative Assembly and a Executive covering the six counties of Northern Ireland. Then there is a North-South Ministerial Council involving the administrations in both Belfast and Dublin. Furthermore, there are all-Ireland Implementation Bodies dealing with various sectors of social and economic life which can be added to. There are also provisions for other all-Ireland institutions such as a Joint Parliamentary Forum, a Civic Forum and a Joint Committee on Human Rights. And of course there are the



long-standing institutions in the twenty-six counties.

Taking account of realities on the ground and the need to proceed cautiously in the process of Irish reunification, it would seem prudent to build on these structures, notably having regard to unionist sensitivities and apprehensions. A way of doing so is outlined as follows.

A CONFEDERATION

A confederal arrangement could be instituted on the island to begin with. This could see the Legislative Assembly and the Oireachtas continuing to function under the statutory direction of a confederal Convocation based on the Joint Parliamentary Forum. The North-South Ministerial Council could be transformed into a confederal.

Administration under which a northern Executive and southern Government would also continue to operate. The all-Ireland Civic Forum could be developed as a confederal Senate. This would mean the final repeal of the Act of Union and the transfer of reserved powers for Northern Ireland at present held by London under the

Northern Ireland Act to these institutions along with similar powers being transferred from Dublin by way of amendments to the Irish Constitution. Those powers cover matters such as defence, treaties and international trade.

Within the new confederal Administration and confederal Convocation, Rules would have to be agreed for safeguards by way of appropriately weighting representation, officerships and voting procedures, with precedents existing at present in the north being looked at. Local Government should

be reviewed and strengthened, particularly in the north, perhaps including the likes of cantons there, thus giving increased assurance to unionists, especially in a situation of a growing nationalist population in the six counties.

COMMONWEALTH OF IRELAND COṂLAṬAS NA HÉIREANN

The confederation could be officially titled the Commonwealth of Ireland along with a similarly designated Commonwealth Convocation and Commonwealth Administration. The Commonwealth's constitution could be termed a Covenant and its two (6 and 26 county) units described respectively as Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic (latterly as distinct from Republic of Ireland). There could be a rotating Commonwealth Premier functioning as head of Administration.

A new flag and new anthem could be sorted out in due course, with the tricolour being left as the emblem of the Irish Republic and an internally agreed emblem decided for Northern Ireland, taking account of current flags there. English and Irish could be given equal official language status with Irish speakers at last being treated in actuality as having no less entitlements than English speakers.

Underlying all of this would be the need for a Bill of Rights for citizens under various headings. (By the way, 'commonwealth' is historically and politically often just a synonym for 'republic'.)

THE CURRENT COMMONWEALTH

As for the issue frequently raised of the existing Commonwealth headed by Queen Elizabeth, an Irish Commonwealth Association could be set up with people throughout Ireland individually joining as they wished, along with corporate membership being open to institutions and local administrations as desired, and provision made for this Association to participate in some manner in the existing Commonwealth. In that way, nobody would be forcibly kept out of the present

Commonwealth or so included in it.

RECONCILIATION NOT RENUNCIATION

A reason for opting for a confederal structure that does not seem to be thought of up until now is that it might be better in the short term for underpinning the aims of advancing the causes of a truly free and Gaelic Ireland. In a unitary structure for the island, there would probably be calls for more compromises on the language front than could be raised within a 26 county Irish Republic as part of a confederation. That would still leave meaningful progress to be made as far as possible under that rubric in Northern Ireland. Too frequently, calls for reconciliation become demands for renunciation in respect of important parts of identity such as the Gaelic, and that is precisely how both certain unionist and pseudo-liberal elements throughout the island could coalesce in an assault on Gaelic heritage and related promotional projects.

These elements are also the ones that urge a dumbed down nationalism, semi-attachment to Britain and even acceptance of royalty as part of a settlement. Ironically, perhaps, the partition boundary line today could, within a united Ireland, and in the immediate future at least, thus help preserve Gaelic culture and counter attempted diminution of overall Irish sovereignty. Furthermore, a binary arrangement for Irish unity might in fact maximise the political strength of Sinn Féin on the island, given that it is shaping up to be the largest party in each of the six and twenty-six county areas, while one does not know quite how things might turn out for it in a unitary setup.

PREPARATION FOR LAUNCH

We put the above forward as one possible basis for discussion. This could be elaborated on and discussed in all sorts of ways. And, no doubt, there will be several other models for contemplation. But the point has been reached where one can no

longer simply intone about Irish unity. It has been firmly placed on the agenda and the time has arrived to start designing the vessel for construction in due course and

eventual launch.

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