

NEWRY AND MOURNE LOCAL STRATEGY PARTNERSHIP

“The Challenge of Change: the future of Newry & Mourne”

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Address by

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“FUTURE CITIZENSHIP”

I would like to consider three themes which, I believe, are crucial to future citizenship in Newry and Mourne:

1. The question of identity.
2. The challenge of Cohesion and Integration.
3. The need for Civic Leadership.

The Question of Identity.

At a recent meeting of the Corrymeela Community its leader, Dr. David Stevens, posed two important questions for these times:

‘Who are we?’

‘Who might we hope to be?’

The question of who we are might seem crystal clear for a lot of people: British or Irish; Protestant or Catholic.

However, it still serves to separate us.

Take the Northern Ireland football team as an example.

Players speak of it being an honour to play for their country and managers urge supporters to get behind their country.

But, for many nationalists, their country team would be the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, for many, a ‘national team’ does not actually exist, since there is no all-Ireland team.

Defining who we are is potentially divisive, yet it remains important.

And aren't we guilty of idealising the bond we have with both Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland?

For unionists, there have been ample instances and indications of the level of disinterest in Great Britain regarding Northern Ireland.

For nationalists, as the centenary of partition draws closer, recent election campaigns in the Republic indicate that, for ordinary citizens, Northern Ireland is way down the list of what's important.

Would many here dispute that if they could get away with it, successive British governments would have happily said to Dublin:

"Here, take it. You can have the whole island."

Or that successive Irish governments would have said:

"Now, hold on a minute."

And, for that matter, the attitude of most unionists to the Union and of nationalists to unity is highly conditional.

Coming out of the Troubles, there is a lot of fuzzy thinking on all sides about who we are and who we might hope to be.

We have Sinn Fein and the DUP together at the head of government, looking and behaving like victors.

What they have won is an electoral contest.

What they have won is the right to share power.

Their respective causes remain unfulfilled.

There is no united Ireland but perhaps greater potential for one.

The Union is not as copper-fastened as Unionists would like it to be but it is there for as long as anyone can see into the future.

The central conflict remains unresolved.

However, all are now agreed that there is no justification for that conflict being expressed in violent form.

The formation of an Executive on 8 May, 2007, marked the end of the transition years from the Troubles to Peace.

We are now a 'post-settlement society'.

And this place will work if we don't treat it as a 'country' or as the exclusive property of one State.

We need to view Northern Ireland, not as a country or a state – or a 'statelet' – but as a 'society'.

A shared society, with division and wisdom in its foundations.

Division - which can come to the surface in the right circumstances.

Wisdom – because deep within our bones, as strong as our capacity to divide from each other, there is a common awareness that we must not drift backwards.

There will be no new Troubles.

Dr. Mike Cowan, of Loyola University in New Orleans, was in Newry recently at a seminar organised by the Glenree Centre.

He quoted from the Book of Proverbs:

“Without a vision the people perish.”

In the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the St. Andrews Agreement of 2006, there are new, explicit principles of governance and new, implicit civic norms which will percolate outwards and downwards as our new political arrangement takes hold.

In particular, I would highlight four such civic norms:

1. Cross Community Partnership – as modelled in the Executive, the Assembly committees; the District Councils; District Policing Partnerships and Local Strategy Partnerships.

2. Pluralism – for the first time in our history, the two main traditions that form this society, the British and the Irish, have a formula for co-existence and, indeed, cross-fertilisation. The British tradition can now live free from a sense of threat and the need for the inhibition of defensiveness. The Irish tradition can now live free from a sense of inequality and the need for the inhibition of ambivalence about this place.

These two great dynamics – one towards the Union with Great Britain and the other towards the re-unification of the island – can now evolve in this society in a way that is not conflictual for this generation and which can take form in a manner considered appropriate by a future generation and which, perhaps, we, in our era, cannot yet imagine.

It was Thomas Paine who warned against the arrogance of seeking to rule from beyond the grave.

3. *Human Rights* – are another civic norm which will serve as benchmarks of how each citizen can expect to be treated and how we should treat each other.

4. *Diversity* – We live in an age of globalisation, with 200 million people on the move across the globe. The expansion of the European Union is another factor stimulating steadily growing migration into our society, bringing a challenge to indigenous communities, to embrace the ‘children’ of the world just as the world was asked to embrace generations of Ireland’s children.

We need to foster an awareness of migration and diversity as a sign of health and a bonus to our society rather than being any kind of threat.

In his remarks in Newry recently, Mike Cowan warned that without a shared vision we are left with divisions.

Reflecting on the challenge facing his home city of New Orleans in the aftermath of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, Cowan quoted at length from a speech made by Martin Luther King Jnr, at a church conference in Nashville on 27 December, 1962:

“When the desegregation process is one hundred per cent complete, the human relations dilemma of our nation will still be monumental unless we launch now the parallel thrust of the integration process.

In the context of what our national community needs, desegregation alone is empty and shallow. We must always be aware that our ultimate goal is integration, and that desegregation is only a first step on the road to the good society. Integration is creative, and is therefore more profound and far-reaching than desegregation. Integration is the positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed participation of (all) in the total range of human activities.

Integration is genuine, interpersonal, inter-group ‘doing’. Integration is the ultimate goal of our national community. We do not have to look very far to see the pernicious effects of a desegregated society that is not integrated. It leads to physical proximity without spiritual affinity. It gives us a society where elbows are together and hearts are apart. It gives us spatial togetherness and spiritual apartness.”

Applied to our own times, Dr.King’s words serve to remind us that it is one thing to end violence. It is one thing to pass laws against discrimination and sectarianism. It is one thing to agree on what

we are all against. It is quite another to agree, together, on what we are for.

In this new, post-settlement society there is a danger that partnership will degenerate into cohabitation; that instead of a shared society we will have a 'shared-out' society; That we will settle into parallel living between unionist and nationalist.

On all sides people are implicitly agreed on the dangers of poking at the embers of the Troubles.

So, most people will move on. But, to what?

To a pre-occupation with economy?

And, especially for the young, to a new kind of hedonism where having a good time is the 'be-all' and 'end-all' of life?

The Troubles were a crisis for the spirituality of our society.

Our spirits emerge now, somewhat battered and a bit broken.

We need to take the time to figure out how to create ways to re-visit old wounds lest a future climate re-infect them.

We need to listen to each other and learn the lessons that are there to be learned.

Back to David Stevens, of Corrymeela, again -

He recalls sitting in a bar in Prague with a group of men, now in old age, who were veterans of Charter 77, a civil rights campaign waged against the old, oppressive communist regime in Czechoslovakia. While the old men reminisced, young women came into the bar, dressed to party, answering their mobile phones, full of the carefree buzz of the present. And the old veterans, still carrying the wounds and wisdom of a darker age, wondered how to ensure that their stories would get passed on to a new generation without boring the young.

Amidst our newfound peace, there remains a need for us to address the past in a way that is helpful to the future and bears relevance to it.

The challenge of Cohesion and Integration.

One significant thing which we can already predict about our future is that our society will be more diverse than anything that previous generations have known. In this respect, we can learn

much from the experiences of other societies that have absorbed a generation of immigration and would now admit to strategic errors. In these early years of diversification, we should make their hindsight be our foresight and plan well.

In France, the historic approach to immigrants was to impose assimilation; to oblige immigrant cultures to conform to French ways. Now, decades on, we see signs of crisis for the assimilation strategy, with cyclical riots in ethnic minority districts of Paris and other major French cities. New generations of ethnic minority French citizens, born of immigrant parents or descended from immigrant grandparents, have been expressing pent up frustrations with French society for failing to give them due recognition or fair and equal treatment.

In 2005, using funds provided by the Special European Union Programmes Body, Mediation Northern Ireland, Newry and Mourne District Council and Belfast City Council organised a trip to Amsterdam for a group of civic leaders to study the Dutch experience of migration.

In the Netherlands, the established approach to immigration was to promote a form of multi-culturalism. Historically, the Dutch had afforded Protestants, Catholics and others separate schools and institutions, including separate newspapers and media.

When large numbers of migrants (known as guest workers) were attracted to the Netherlands to meet its labour demands in the 1960s, coming from former Dutch colonies and Muslim areas of north Africa, they were allowed to establish separate institutions as part of the Dutch way of dealing with difference by co-existence, known as 'pillarisation'.

After the world oil crisis of the early 1970s, the Dutch experienced their share of the international economic downturn and large numbers of migrant workers, now settled in the country with their families, were made redundant. With poor language and literary skills, a disproportionate amount of poverty took hold of immigrant communities and a new under-class developed.

The legacy of such alienation became apparent in the Netherlands in recent years with a number of acts of violence committed by Dutch born ethnic minority citizens causing outrage in Dutch society. The traditional liberalism of the Netherlands has been tested and the cohesion of Dutch society is now a matter of concern.

In England, in the light of growing concerns about race relations, alienation of sections of society from the State and the new phenomenon of domestic terrorism, a Commission on Integration

and Cohesion was established by the Government within the past year. They have just published their report, entitled, 'Our Shared Future' and clearly influenced by their study of Community Relations policy in Northern Ireland.

This Commission have suggested a re-definition of terms. They define *cohesion* as –

“principally the process that must happen in all communities to ensure different groups of people get on well together”.

Integration, on the other hand, they define as –

“principally the process that ensures that new residents and existing residents adapt to one another”.

The Commission's report sets out six features of an integrated and cohesive community as follows:

1. *There is a clearly defined and widely shared sense of the contribution of different individuals and different communities to a future vision for a neighbourhood, city, region or county.*
2. *There is a strong sense of an individual's rights and responsibilities when living in a particular place – people know what everyone expects of them, and what they can expect in return.*
3. *Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities, access to services and treatment.*
4. *There is a strong sense of trust in institutions locally to act fairly in arbitrating between different interests and for their role and justifications to be subject to public scrutiny.*
5. *There is a strong recognition of the contribution of both those who have newly arrived and those who already have deep attachments to a particular place, with a focus on what they have in common.*
6. *There are strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and other institutions within neighbourhoods.*

The Commission also lists four principles which informed their report. They can be summarised as:

- An emphasis on what binds communities together rather than what differences divide them.

- An emphasis on responsibilities as well as entitlements, in regard to the local and the 'national' level.
- An emphasis on civility and mutual respect, recognising that labour moves around, communities change and there is a need for mutual hospitality between groups.
- A commitment to equality that sits alongside the need to make social justice visible and ensure that, through transparency, citizens trust their institutions.

It would seem, then, that in places like Newry and Mourne, the quality of our future society will be largely determined by the extent to which we develop cohesion and integration within and between three dimensions of civic life:

1. Within the nationalist and unionist traditions.
2. Between the nationalist and unionist traditions.
3. Between the indigenous people and migrant people.

In this respect, we should value and affirm traditional forms of community such as the parish, the GAA and the Orange Order.

There is a need to care for the traditions and values that underpin community life across Newry and Mourne while, at the same time, promoting cohesion between communities here.

And, as the Commission from England recommends, we need to proactively develop integration between indigenous communities and the newly arrived.

If we fail to do so; if we sleep-walk our way from a duo-cultured past into a multi-cultured future, in a generation the population of Newry and Mourne will find themselves struggling with the kind of divisions that beset other societies in Europe today.

The need for Civic Leadership.

Addressing the current challenges facing New Orleans, Mike Cowan recently observed that –

“a segregated civil society is a source of division that makes the work of government harder”.

The same, of course, could be said of any context, including here in Newry and Mourne.

I believe that community cohesion requires dynamic social partnership between three key sectors:

- The Local Authority and Public Services - elected representatives and public officials.
- Civic Society – non-elected leaders, including business and commerce.
- The community/voluntary sector.

In my work I find a pattern which must be familiar to many here: a tendency for too many people in each of these sectors to function in a kind of ghetto; to operate within a silo culture. The community/voluntary sector can be dismissive and afflicted by an inverted snobbery towards anyone who is not 'grassroots'. Business can be detached and remote. The Local Authority can take the community sector for granted. Public Services can be professionally aloof.

Of course, here in Newry and Mourne, there are many good examples – of individuals and of organisations – of quality social partnership. But, I am sure that those responsible for such good practice will agree that it has always required sacrifice and effort. There is a need now, at leadership level, to make cross-sectoral social partnership the norm in civic life; the accepted way of doing things.

In 1933, while Britain still struggled to recover from the First World War, the Conservative Party leader, Stanley Baldwin observed:

“We are in a post war society but some of our leaders have pre war minds”.

In these times there is a pressing need for us to cultivate a post Troubles mind.

For the individual citizen, this involves a need to embrace new civic norms of pluralism and diversity.

For communities, the need to conserve social bonds while building new bridges to other communities and traditions.

For indigenous communities, to value immigration as a sign of economic health and to come to terms with the reality of being citizens of an enlarged European Union and globalised economy.

In this country that is so proud of its generations of emigrants and their achievements across the world, we now need an identity as

world citizens and recognise that the world now wants to live with us.