

Foreward to 1993 Compilation

Ideas from which a democratic future can be formed - 1st June, 1993

FOREWORD

The Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, which offer us this compilation of their thinking, is not just another well intentioned inter-faith initiative coming up for air. It represents by far the most hopeful dialogue since the Troubles broke out. In these pages you will find more than morsels of hope. You will find the ideas from which a democratic future can be constructed.

That is a large claim. The politicians have failed us thus far. The `experts' (including this one) have burdened the shelves with their analyses and prescriptions. Now we have a group of Church people with their nostrums. What is so important about that? The reason why this group and its questions and answers are important is blindingly simple. They subordinate politics to their religious beliefs. Jesus Christ comes first before loyalty to nation, tribe, community or politics. Who else has been prepared to say that as the first step in dialogue? No one I suggest. Not the politicians. Least of all the Churches. Our Church leaders see themselves, like the politicians, as representing their respective communities. They have become media constructed barometers of fears and conduits for accusation. Frankly, too often their politely expressed views convey signals of prejudice, exclusivism and lack of forgiveness.

No one in Northern Ireland in a position of authority, religious or secular, confronts the notes in their own eyes in public. Behind too many expressions of concern over violence and political paralysis lies the conviction that the community one speaks from or, on behalf of, is the exclusive agency of truth and righteousness. Those who minister are often, no less than politicians, witness to an unquestioned fusion of faith and politics.

In contrast, this interchurch group from North and South declare that *without exception* `all of us share in the blame for our present troubles and for the failure of our communities to live together in peace and mutual respect'.

The cynic inured by too many fine words may ask where do more fine words lead? The answer is to tough questions and painfully achieved admissions about our mutual plight. For what is truly distinctive about the Faith and Politics group is that, anchored in their understanding of the Scriptures, they have formulated questions and proposed answers to some of the deepest issues of political life that divide us. This book is not about nice people asking naive political questions. It is rather a record of dialogue in which our divisions are directly confronted and discussed. The members of the group have confronted the past in their reflections on remembering the Boyne (1690) and the Easter Rising (1916). They have faced the present in the chapter on the Anglo-Irish Agreement and they have sketched the elements of a possible future. In each of the chapters in the book there are direct, practical questions posed for Catholics and Protestants. There are questions for Northerners and Southerners. All of us are invited to answer these questions for ourselves as well as examining what the different members of this multi-denominational, multi-allegiance group conclude.

In a foreword I am not going to give their answers to the big questions. I will state that I agree with the big idea that informs all their thinking. They recognise that we all are interdependent on this island. We have been bequeathed political structures North and South which denied that reality. The task, before it is too late, is to bring the different communities to see that we are living a lie. The challenge is to involve ordinary people in new accommodations of diversity suited to our times. The resources to prepare us for that challenge are between the covers of this book.

I have only one quarrel with the reach of the Group's analysis. Focusing on Ireland is not the whole picture. There is another frontier to cross in the search for our future: the Irish sea. The nature of the interdependence of both parts of Ireland and Britain needs to be thought through. The Britain where I live is poorly understood in Ireland, North or South. It is seen through a stereotype of the posh English accent and Home County patricianism. There is more to it than that, just as there is more to Ireland than stereotypes of paramilitaries, porter and bible thumping. Britain is a diverse society which embraces its own different North, South, East and West, and in which it sometimes seems impossible to meet any one who does not claim some Irish blood. It is also a society which is ready to admit that it shares the blame for the mess we are in and which stands ready to join the tough work pioneered by the Faith and Politics group for reconciliation and justice. Anyone who fails to see the truth of this after the Warrington bomb and the visit of President Robinson to that town in 1993 is missing an important stirring in the potential for peace on these islands. The average person here is not pro-Catholic or pro-Protestant. They have positive feelings for all sides and want to live in peace with the island of Ireland and its communities. They also have their own grievances: constitutional, economic, social, and political. They can learn from Ireland's efforts to prepare for the future as we can from theirs.

Still, our cynic may say all such is mere words and aspirations. Where does it lead? How does it fare against the guns of the IRA or UFF? But our cynic should think more clearly. The conflict is about ideas. The gun is simply an idea arbitrarily enforced. The question is: which set of ideas will win out. The possible models for the future of Northern Ireland by now should be starkly obvious to us all. Each model involves an acknowledgement of the reality of the political divisions and animosity in which we live. One proposes the building of a common future based on the recognition of both our diversity and our interdependence, the acknowledgement of our common needs for equality, justice, the rule of law, and prosperity. It rejects violence from paramilitaries or arbitrary force exercised by the state as having any role in securing these goals.

The other possibility is a final choice to separate the communities, the acceptance of the thesis that the communities in Northern Ireland should divorce as the price of peace on the island and between the islands. This would leave only the minimum institutions necessary to conduct common affairs between the people of Northern Ireland, and allow them to have such corridors as can be devised, institutional and territorial, to Britain and to the Republic. It must be clear that the choice is ultimately a matter for the communities themselves. There can be a Vance-Owen plan for Northern Ireland if that is what we choose.

The signatories of the Declaration of Faith and Commitment in this book have set their face against this latter option as the way to achieve justice, stability and peace. They favour the former path, even with all its difficulties. If you believe theirs is the right road, join them. Otherwise, by default if not by conscious choice, you will be accepting that the hand history has played in Ireland cannot now be trumped.

Kevin Boyle,

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