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**Northern Ireland and the British-Irish
relationship: The Gladstonian Settlement
revisited
Transcript**

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NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE BRITISH-IRISH RELATIONSHIP: THE GLADSTONIAN SETTLEMENT REVISITED

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One tries to make these lectures topical, so I would like to begin by thanking Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams for settling yesterday and making the lecture even more topical than it otherwise would be.

Northern Ireland is an exception to all the generalisations we tend to make about Britain. The first generalisation is that Britain is an island, but in fact the United Kingdom is an island with part of another island, that is part of the island of Ireland. The official name of our state is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so it is an island and part of another island. It is also often said that our borders have existed from time immemorial and that we have evolved through the centuries. However, the borders of the United Kingdom date from 1921, when a treaty was signed with Irish Nationalist representatives, by which the whole of Ireland except for Northern Ireland ceased to be ruled by Westminster. Before then the United Kingdom consisted of the whole of two islands – Great Britain and Ireland. So our grandparents lived under a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, whereas we live under United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

This treaty – it is called a treaty even though it was not signed with an independent state – was signed with the leaders of a nationalist guerrilla movement in Ireland, and it masks the fact that one part of the United Kingdom – the 26 counties which today form the Irish Republic – seceded after a violent struggle with the British authorities. We fought a guerrilla war with them, which we lost in effect, and we ceded most of the island of Ireland, and that makes us quite unique amongst the countries of Western Europe. This is often forgotten, when we often talk about our evolutionary and stable constitutional progress. Thus Ireland is an exception to every generalisation.

Northern Ireland is also often forgotten when we make generalisations about the stability of our institutions and our general tolerance. On the whole, the rest of the British do not think much about Northern Ireland, and when they do, they tend not to be very enthusiastic about it. Since 1983 opinion polls in England have shown a steady majority for Northern Ireland not to be part of the United Kingdom but to be ceded to the Irish Republic. The difficulty is that the people of Northern Ireland do want to remain part of the United Kingdom.

So Northern Ireland seems unloved, unwanted, and forgotten. But, how did it come to remain part of the United Kingdom? Why were those six counties left out of the settlement with the rest of Ireland?

In order to answer these questions, we have to go back to the history of Northern Ireland, and indeed, I believe that Northern Ireland is more drenched in history than any other part of the United Kingdom. In 1921, when the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, was trying to get a settlement with the Irish, he met with the Irish Nationalist leader, de Valera, to try and get a discussion of Irish grievances. Here he began by saying, "Let us put things on the table. What precisely are the grievances of the Irish?" and de Valera replied, "Well, if you look at the time of Cromwell..." and it took a long time to get to the present. So it is all very much drenched in history.

In Northern Ireland, of course, it still matters whether someone is a Protestant or a Catholic, in a way it does not matter anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It ceased to matter in Britain at least before the First World War. Religion matters in Northern Ireland because it is associated with national claims. Almost all of the Protestants want to remain within the United Kingdom. They are Unionists, in a way which makes 'Unionist' and 'Protestant' effectively synonymous. They want to preserve the union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But perhaps the majority of the Catholics, by contrast, would prefer to unite with the Republic of Ireland, and so are Nationalists. Religion combined with nationalism makes for an intractable combination. In Northern Ireland, religion and nationalism are really different ways of saying the same thing. The same is true in another intractable area in the world, in the Middle East, where, to be an Israeli (or at least a first class citizen of the Israeli) is to be Jewish, and to be an Arab is to be a Muslim citizen. So we see that religion and nationalism combined there is highly intractable. The reason being that it is very difficult to get a bargain or agreement amongst people who believe in absolutes.

In the rest of the United Kingdom, we might disagree quite strongly about issues such as the National Health Service or education, but we can usually arrive at some sort of compromise or bargain which gives each side a little of what it wants, but you cannot bargain in the case of religion or nationalism. You cannot be half a Catholic or half a British citizen. You either or you are not; there is seemingly no middle position.

In Ireland, as opposed to the rest of Britain at the time, the Protestant Reformation never really took root, and the majority on that island of Ireland remained Catholic. But nevertheless, for a long period of time there has been a significant Protestant presence in Ireland. Historians disagree as to the precise time at which this Protestant presence began. Protestant historians will tell you there has always been a Protestant presence in Ireland; Catholic historians will say that the Protestants were planted there by the British to keep the Catholics down, that there has not always been a Protestant presence. However, there is at least agreement that there has been a strong Protestant presence since the 17th Century, and that that Protestant presence was particularly strong in the North-East, where people from Scotland had settled in what is now Northern Ireland.

The Protestants in Ireland always called themselves “the British”, and they regarded the Catholics as disloyal citizens, as many people in this part of the water did in the 17th Century. We still have the Act of Settlement by which no Catholic can become Queen or King, Head of State, and any member of the royal family who marries a Catholic loses their position in their succession. So the Protestants regarded the Catholics as disloyal, but the Catholics thought the Protestants were colonisers from the British, planted in Ireland to hold the Catholic population down as second class citizens.

From the 18th Century, there was a growing sense of Irish identity and nationalism, and that exacerbated the differences and increased the conflict between the two groups. In 1886 a Liberal Prime Minister, Gladstone, introduced a policy of home rule for Ireland to an Irish Parliament situated in Dublin. This was what we would now call a very wide level of devolution I think. This was strongly resisted by the Protestants, and from that time, the terms “Protestant” and “Unionist” have become interchangeable. The Protestants were strongly supported by the Conservative Party, which for a long time called themselves the Unionist Party, though they ceased to do that in 1922 when the union with Ireland had broken.

I was speaking some while ago to a friend of mine, who had stood as a young man as a Liberal candidate in Northern Ireland in the constituency of North Antrim. It had been represented for many years by the Reverend Paisley, so needless to say he lost his deposit there. He was sitting in a hotel one morning, having coffee, and a very young boy of about twelve came up to him and said, “Are you the Liberal candidate for North Antrim?” He said, “Yes, I am.” The boy said, “Now, tell me, wasn’t Gladstone a Liberal?” “Yes, he was.” He said, “Now look, if Gladstone’s home rule had been passed, wouldn’t the situation in Northern Ireland perhaps be better now than it actually is?” My friend naturally said, “Yes, I think it would be.” This just shows that history is something very deep in Ireland and understood even by very young people. I do not think you would get many twelve year olds on this side of the water asking candidates about Mr Gladstone!

The Protestants resisted home rule in Ireland. Some said this showed there was not just one – Catholic – nation in Ireland but two nations – a Catholic nation and a Protestant nation. But that is not quite right because the Protestants did not, and do not, see themselves as a separate nation, but they see themselves as a part of the British nation. They said they were not part of the Irish nation, and if there is an Irish nation, it is subordinate to the British nation, and that they themselves are fundamentally British and do not want to be anything else. They are Unionists and called themselves British. Indeed, they are amongst the few in the United Kingdom who still call themselves British. The Scots now call themselves Scots, the Welsh Welsh, and the English increasingly call themselves English to mark themselves off from the Scots and Welsh who have devolution. But the Northern Irish Protestants call themselves British – not Irish or Northern Irish, but British. They certainly do not seek independence for Northern Ireland; they seek to maintain the union with the rest of Britain, and that is a position of equal citizenship. That is what they want: a position of equal citizenship with everyone else in the country.

This I think has made it very difficult for any government to resist their claims, because they were not asking, as the Irish Nationalists were, for a special privilege for home rule or independence. They were only asking that their position in the United Kingdom be left undisturbed. They did not themselves want home rule or devolution or anything like that. They wanted to be treated in exactly the same way as someone living in Liverpool, Manchester or London, to accept the same obligations, the same rights as everyone else. Thus they said, ‘if you pass home rule or independence against our wishes, you are expelling us from the United Kingdom against our wishes. You are saying that the Irish should have the right of self-determination, but surely we do, as Unionist people; we should have our own right of self-determination. We are not asking for special privileges or advantages; all we are asking is that we can remain what we have always been – British citizens.’ So it is very difficult to resist.

I hope this shows that the saying about devolution – that it was four nations and a funeral, that the United Kingdom was four nations and a funeral – is wrong; there are not four nations; there are three nations, the British, Welsh, and the Scots, and a fourth part, the majority of whom claim to be part of the British nation, and many of the minority say they are part of the Irish nation. There is no Northern Irish nation, but there are different and conflicting allegiances.

The Protestant Unionists in the South of Ireland were a scattered minority and quite powerless to resist home rule or independence. But in the North East of Ireland, where the Scots had mainly settled, they were a very compact majority and so they could resist home rule for Ireland, with physical force if necessary, and they threatened to do that. They said they would not respect the law, that if an act was passed establishing a Parliament in Dublin, they would declare a UDI, a Unilateral Declaration of Independence, and they would fight the law because they had a higher loyalty to the British nation. They were, as they put it, the King’s rebels; they were rebelling in the name of their allegiance to the King. They said they would not accept home rule, even if passed by Parliament.

That created a crisis which tended to paralyse the government in the first two decades of the century. Eventually, this was settled by Lloyd George, with great political skill, in the coalition government which ruled Britain from 1918 to 1922. I think it is significant it was a coalition because it would have been very difficult for a party government of the left or right to settle it, but since Lloyd George was a Liberal, he was the head of a coalition in which the majority were Conservative, and so he could bind the Conservatives into the settlement. His Government made three crucial decisions which made Northern Ireland what it is today.

First, he decided that you could not force the Unionists into a united Ireland. You might want to do so, you might think that was a sensible thing for them, but they simply said no, never, the way Ian Paisley says never, and you could not force them into a united Ireland. That meant, therefore, you had to partition Ireland and divide it into two parts, one of which would be independent, the other of which would remain British.

The second question was what should the size of the area that was going to remain British be? In the end, this excluded area was to comprise, as it still does, six counties of Northern Ireland. Four of them had large Protestant majorities: they were Antrim, Armagh, Down and Londonderry. The nationalists call Londonderry, Derry, for obvious reasons, but it is the same place. You call it either Londonderry or Derry, which shows the difficulties of the Northern Ireland problem: the very way you name things shows whether you are a Unionist or a Nationalist. I will use both names so as not to cause difficulties. So Antrim, Armagh, Down, Londonderry/Derry, but there were also two counties with a very narrow Catholic majority – Fermanagh and Tyrone, the border counties. These six excluded counties are sometimes called Ulster, but in fact the province of Ulster is nine counties, and there are three counties of Ulster which are in the Republic – Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan. So the settlement partitions Ulster as well as the island of Ireland; it is not the whole of Ulster but a part of it; six counties.

You may say, “Why those six counties and why not the whole nine counties?” The answer is that the nine counties had a very narrow Protestant majority, and the Protestant Unionists were worried that that majority would not last. Catholics at that time still had a higher birth rate so the majority turning to Catholic was a real possibility, and then it would vote to join the Republic and the Unionists would lose out. So they said, “We do not want all the nine counties. We want the six counties.” The six counties was the largest unit that they could really hold, they thought. The Nationalists said they did not accept partition at all, but they said that if you have it at all, you should only have the four counties with Protestant majorities.

In the end, the British Government said the six counties were right, and they said this for a reason which now looks rather odd. They said in the six counties there will be a solid Protestant majority. It was about two to one then, but now it is about three to two. They said, if there is a solid Protestant majority, there will not be the same temptation to treat the Catholics badly as if you have a small Protestant majority. If you have a small Protestant majority, the Protestants will always be fearful of any concessions to the Catholics that will lead them into the Irish Republic. If you have a large majority, both sides will know they have to work it, and therefore, the British Government said, they will be more tolerant. That did not prove to be the case, but that is what they thought at the time. What you can see is that Northern Ireland is, in one sense, an artificial unit. It is simply the largest area which the Unionists thought they could control. It has no other sort of logic, as the province of Ulster would have a certain logic.

So those are the first two decisions: you partition Ireland; and secondly, you say that it is partitioned along the line of the six counties which remain British. The third decision was that these six counties should not be governed from Westminster, as the Unionists then wanted, but they should have their own devolved Parliament; a home rule Parliament. It is a paradox, that Northern Ireland, which strongly resisted home rules, had a home rule Parliament forced on it which its people did not want. The reason the British Government did that was that they too hoped that eventually Northern Ireland would join the Republic, and they said if we give Northern Ireland devolution it will realise its future really lies in Ireland and not with Britain, and then we will be rid of the whole problem. It is a paradox, that the one part of Ireland which so strongly resisted home rule had a home rule Parliament imposed on it.

In the 1920's, once the Unionists had their Parliament they saw this could be rather useful as a veto upon any Westminster politicians trying to settle with the Republic over the heads of the Unionist politicians. They said you cannot make any decision about Northern Ireland without the consent of our Parliament here; a majority at Westminster is not enough, you also need our consent, and we will never give it because we have a permanent Unionist majority, so it is a veto. In a famous phrase, they accepted the Parliament as “a supreme sacrifice and a final settlement of the Irish problem.”

There is a sense in which the Lloyd George's three points – the partition, the six counties excluded area, the Northern Ireland Parliament – can be seen as a settlement of sorts, but it was not a total solution to the Irish problem. It might possibly have been a solution if the Unionists in Northern Ireland had adopted a kind of tolerant approach to the Nationalist population that the British Government hoped would be adopted, but in fact they didn't. Their reason for this was that, they claimed, wherever the Nationalists get control, they will try and push Northern Ireland into the Republic. Indeed, when Nationalists got control of the border councils, they raised the Irish flag and tried to avoid recognising the jurisdiction of the British Government. So they said the Nationalists are not a loyal opposition in the way that, say, the Conservatives are in Britain today; they are a disloyal opposition and a threat to the state. They used that as a justification to treat them, in effect, as second class citizens.

The problem worsened when, in 1937, de Valera's Ireland drew up a new constitution which explicitly laid claim to the island of Ireland. The Unionists claimed that it justified what they were doing in seeing the Catholics as a disloyal minority which could not be trusted. There was widespread discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland, especially in housing allocation, and there was also widespread gerrymandering of constituencies to ensure that the Catholics were a minority in the voting even when they were a majority of the citizens. This went

on for about 45 years, on the whole unchallenged.

In the late 1960s, you had a new generation of Catholics who were professionals, better educated, less deferential, less willing to accept the restrictions that their parents had perhaps accepted. With the civil rights movement being of importance in many parts of the world, it erupted in Northern Ireland. The Unionist majority reacted fairly brutally to it, and this was when Ian Paisley first came to public notice and when he gained his reputation, by inciting the Unionists to remove Catholics from mixed areas of housing and push them into ghettos in Northern Ireland. He incited Protestant religious fervour when it was perhaps beginning to die down.

These problems meant the British Government, which wanted to turn its back on Northern Ireland, had to face up to what was going on, and in 1972 under Edward Heath, the Conservative Prime Minister, the British Government abolished the Northern Ireland Parliament and ruled Northern Ireland directly from Westminster, under a Northern Ireland Secretary as Scotland and Wales were ruled by a Scottish and Welsh Secretary at that time. This seemed to many a desirable solution to integrate Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and many people said that this was a good thing because the Northern Irish would be treated just as the Scots and Welsh and everyone else was, as part of the United Kingdom.

However, it was not a solution, for the reason that the party system in Northern Ireland is quite different from that in Scotland and Wales. In Scotland and Wales, as well as the Nationalist parties, you have Labour, Conservative and Liberal parties, so the party system is integrated with the rest of the United Kingdom. But in Northern Ireland you do not really have much of a Labour, Conservative or Liberal party.

The Labour Party tried to found a Labour Party of Northern Ireland many years ago, but it proved impossible, because the first question people asked was, "Where do you stand on the border?" If you said you were in favour of the border, you were a Unionist; if you were against the border, you were a Nationalist. There was no chance of getting united trade union or working class support for a Labour Party in Northern Ireland in the way you could in Britain. For instance, if you were in the Labour Party in Liverpool, Glasgow or anywhere else, no one cared whether you were a Protestant or a Catholic. You had a united Labour Party representing the trade unions and the organised working class. You could not do that in Northern Ireland, because the working class was split between the Protestant working class and the Catholic working class, and that division was more important to them than, if you like, the class conflict with their employers. So Northern Ireland remains the one part of the United Kingdom where you cannot join the Labour Party. You are not allowed to join the Labour Party if you are resident in Northern Ireland, and the Labour Party does not contest elections in Northern Ireland.

Until 1989 the Conservatives had no constituency associations in Northern Ireland either, and they did not accept membership from anyone residing there. They do now, and there are some constituency associations, but Conservatives receive only a derisory vote. The majority of the Protestant vote that would go to the Conservatives goes to Unionists, and similarly, the Catholic vote would go to the Nationalists.

The Liberals also got nowhere in Northern Ireland. They could not win Unionist votes because of their Gladstonian tradition of support for home rule, and they could not win Nationalist votes because Nationalists preferred to vote for Republican parties. The Liberal Democrats do have a sister party in Northern Ireland, which is called the Alliance Party, and the Alliance Party is a bi-confessional party that is neither Unionist nor Nationalist. It says that the border should remain as long as there is consent for it, so to that extent one could say that it is a Unionist party. They do seek to get support from both sides of what you might call the tribal divide, but you will not be surprised to hear that they do not get much support and that they are very much a minority party, even more than the Liberal Democrats on this part of the water. The Liberal Democrats themselves do not contest elections in Northern Ireland so they do not split the vote with the Alliance. So none of the three main British parties, in effect, contest elections in Northern Ireland.

What this means is that the voters in Northern Ireland have no say on who forms a British Government. They cannot decide to vote for Tony Blair or Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Menzies Campbell or whoever it is. They are voting for Unionist and Nationalist parties, which clearly are not going to form the Government in the United Kingdom. They play no part, except when there is a hung Parliament, and if there is a hung Parliament they do have a lot of influence. But elections in Northern Ireland are not about who forms the Government; they are about the balance of representation between the Unionists and the Nationalists. In that sense then, Northern Ireland is very different from Scotland and Wales, which do play a part in helping to elect a Government.

It follows from this that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who is at present Peter Hain, can never be representative of the area of which he is responsible. Peter Hain belongs to the Labour Party, but there are no Labour MPs in Northern Ireland. It is true when the Conservatives are in office, they tend to be in a minority in Scotland and Wales, but at least there are some Conservative MPs from Scotland and Wales, but there are simply no Labour or Conservative MPs from Northern Ireland. One previous Northern Ireland Secretary in the 1980s, James Prior, said he felt "as though I was a foreigner in another land" because he had no political support there. So this left a political vacuum which the extremists could exploit, such as the Republican movement, Sinn Fein. One could say it was a form of colonial rule by the British, such that Northern Ireland took on the character of a dependency incapable of self-government. Furthermore, integration would make the Nationalist minority feel they could not express their claims at all, and it made it difficult, if not impossible, to get the cooperation of the Irish Republic in solving the problems of Northern Ireland. Therefore, in the view of most British

Governments, it would make it impossible to defeat terrorism.

It is for these reasons that every British Government since direct rule was imposed in the early 1970s, whether Labour or Conservative, has sought to restore devolution to Northern Ireland. But they do not look for the form of devolution had before, when the Protestants were in the majority and ran things, because that was not acceptable. There must be a different form of devolution, namely, a power-sharing or partnership form of devolution, in which both the Nationalist minority and the Unionist majority share power in Government. It is as if you said you could not form a Government at Westminster unless you have Tony Blair and David Cameron together in the Government; a grand coalition if you like, covering all the main groups. The alternative, the British Governments have said, Catholics will again be treated as second class citizens and we will have terrorism all over again. Thus the minority has to be part of the Executive rather than in permanent opposition, again, because political circumstances in Northern Ireland differ from those in the rest of the country, because in the rest of the country there is a swing of the pendulum. We can all console ourselves if our party is defeated by the hope that it may win next time. Even when you had 18 years of Conservative Government, in 1979 to 1997, there was always the feeling that you might get a change of government, and this was a constraint upon what Government was doing. But of course, that is not the case in Northern Ireland, where voting is determined by fundamental religious and nationalist allegiance, and the parties which represent the Protestant majority will always be in power in Northern Ireland, and the Catholic parties will always be a minority. Therefore, the Westminster type of system will not work there. You have a permanent majority based on a kind of tribal division, and you simply will not get a swing of the pendulum.

This has fundamental consequences in Britain because there is generally speaking a tendency of parties to try and win over the centre ground - the floating voter - in order to try and win elections. This is why people such as Peter Hitchens are now speaking of how David Cameron is abandoning fundamental Conservative principles and trying to win over the middle ground. That seems sensible to me if you have just lost three elections - there is something wrong somewhere, and you do not go on offering the same. I think David Frome, who was George Bush's speech writer, once characterised the psychology of losing parties in saying, "You offer the voters ham and eggs, and they say 'No thank you,' so you say, 'What about double ham and double eggs then?'" It will not work. Similarly, the Labour Party in opposition, it took them quite a while to learn that you had to appeal to the centre ground if you were going to win elections, hence Blair and New Labour. Cameron is trying to do the same for the Conservatives.

Of course, in Northern Ireland, there is no centre floating vote. A Protestant Unionist party will not win votes from Catholic Nationalists, and the Catholics will not win votes from the Protestants. The only floating vote is on the extremes, because you can always be outflanked, in the way that Paisley has outflanked the other Unionist parties, or Gerry Adams has outflanked the other Nationalist parties, by saying "They are selling out your community. They are not defending you as toughly as I would." This explains why it is that the moderate parties have been pushed out and you have got to Paisley and Gerry Adams. The moderate parties no longer really have the same weight, which is why the bi-confessional Alliance Party in the centre gets absolutely nowhere.

Thus we see again that the political conditions in Northern Ireland are fundamentally different from those in the rest of the United Kingdom. This leads to different political arrangements to accommodate these differences.

The settlement which was endorsed, we hope, yesterday, is based on the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement of 1998. This agreement has two fundamental features in it, which are great departures from the Westminster model of government. The first, is a form of partnership government, in recognition of the fact that you cannot govern a divided society through the Westminster model of alternating majorities, but only through partnership. So the two parts of the community - the Unionists and Nationalists - must share power so that neither feels left out in the cold. The second great departure is the recognition that the solution cannot be purely internal, because many Catholics in Northern Ireland feel Irish rather than British, and therefore there must be some recognition of the Irish dimension and some form of connection with the Republic. On the other hand, that must not involve the cession of sovereignty because that would not be acceptable to the Protestants, so it is a very difficult balancing act.

This, in a sense, differs from the other constitutional reforms which I have mentioned, which are solely internal within the United Kingdom. Scottish and Welsh devolution, whatever you may think of them, are internal matters for the United Kingdom. This is not just internal to the United Kingdom. It is both internal but also external in relation to the Irish Republic. You can only do it if you accept the proposition that the sovereign national state may have to be superseded. If you think the sovereign national state is the only thing and you cannot go beyond it, you cannot deal with the problems of Ireland. In one sense we have superseded it, through joining the European Union, a multinational organisation of superior legal order. We are also doing it in Ireland: we are superseding the idea that the national sovereign state is the ultimate entity.

Let me describe these two fundamental principles of the agreement in some more details.

The proposal in the Belfast Good Friday Agreement is that there should be an Assembly of 108 Members in Northern Ireland, elected by the single transferable vote method of proportional representation for four years, and that this should have legislative powers to make laws, as the Scottish Parliament does. But, as I have already indicated, the crucial difference with the Scottish Parliament is that the Executive, the Government, can only be formed in Northern Ireland with the consent of both communities - the Unionists and the Nationalists -

and all legislation requires the consent of both communities. The majority cannot pass any legislation or form a Government on its own. There is a very complicated mechanism to secure this which I won't go into, but let me just say that the First Minister, the head of the Government, and the Deputy, require to be elected a majority in each community, the representatives of each community, as well as the majority of the whole. So in other words, Ian Paisley, if he is going to be the First Minister, he needs the majority of the whole Assembly, which is the majority of the Unionists which he will get, but also a majority of the Nationalists. That is linked together with the election of a Deputy First Minister, which will be Gerry Adams, who also requires support of the majority of the Assembly as a whole; support of the majority of the Nationalists, which of course he will get, and support of the majority of the Unionists. Without both of those you cannot have an Executive.

So it is that they hold office jointly, and if one of them goes, the other goes. It is like a pantomime horse, if you like – they are together, they cannot be separated. Unlike the British Cabinet, they do not then appoint the other Ministers. For instance, once Blair is elected he appoints who he wants to his Cabinet, but in Northern Ireland they will not appoint the other Ministers. The other Ministers are appointed in proportion to their strengths in the Assembly. Thus, the Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionists, have four seats; the Sinn Fein have three seats; and the other Unionist and Nationalist parties similarly, in an Executive of eleven. You can imagine what it would be like at Westminster if we had a Government led by Tony Blair, with David Cameron as Deputy Prime Minister, and the rest of the Cabinet in proportion to party strengths: you would have so many Labour, so many Conservatives, a few Liberals, perhaps one or two Nationalists, and so on. It is an odd form of government, and as I said, it requires Ian Paisley to work with his bitter enemies.

I now want to come on to the external part of the solution, which has two aspects to it: one, to reconcile the Catholic Nationalists; and the other to reconcile the Unionist Protestants.

The first, to reconcile the Catholics, is the so-called Irish Dimension. This involves a North-South Ministerial Council, which is a council representative of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Government of the Republic. This is purely advisory and so has no decision-making powers, but it brings together these representatives of both parts of the island to work together on matters of mutual interest. They can make decisions only if there is unanimity, if both sides agree, but cannot otherwise. Therefore those in Northern Ireland have a veto over what is done and it recognises the Irish identity of the minority. Furthermore, those living in Northern Ireland can, if they wish, hold Irish citizenship as well as British citizenship, if they choose – they can hold dual-citizenship. It is a recognition of the Irish identity of some of the Catholic population. It is a cross-border body.

However, to mollify the Unionists, another body was created, and it is called the British Irish Council. Now, the North South Council is North of Ireland and the South, the British Irish Council is an east-west body. That comprises the Ministers of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, the two Governments on these islands, together with leaders of the various devolved bodies in the United Kingdom – Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – plus, for some reason, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, to discuss matters of mutual interest. It is entirely consultative and so cannot make any decisions. This was established to reassure the Unionists that their British identity would be respected, because they are part of Britain with the other devolved bodies of Scotland and Wales, so they are not going to lose their British citizenship. The argument here is that Northern Ireland is simply one devolved body in a multinational United Kingdom with devolution to Scotland and Wales. From this point of view, it is fortunate we have had devolution for Scotland and Wales, otherwise Northern Ireland would stand out like a sore thumb as the only part which had devolution. So the fact you have got Scottish and Welsh devolution makes the Unionists perhaps feel a bit better. Thus they can say the Belfast Agreement is not the first step on the road to a united Ireland – it is not a slippery slope – but that it will reconcile them to membership of the United Kingdom, and they are more likely to agree to links with the rest of Ireland if undertaken through an organisation which includes the rest of the United Kingdom. It is a balancing act to reassure both sides.

When I spoke about devolution before, I said that this created what I thought was a quasi-federal system of government within the United Kingdom; a system bearing some resemblances with, though not wholly similar to, a federal system, as for example in Canada or Germany. The British Irish Council extends this to create a loose confederal arrangement with the Irish Republic. Therefore, the settlement in Northern Ireland, unlike Scotland and Wales, is far more than simply devolution; it is more complex and constitutionally challenging, because it is not only internal power sharing, but external power sharing between the British and Irish Governments. It is something quite new in British experience, and we do not yet know how it will work out.

For the Belfast Agreement to come into effect, it needed to be approved in both Northern Ireland and in the Republic in referendums which were held on the same day. As part of the agreement, the Irish Republic agreed to remove the provision laying claim to the whole of the island of Ireland in its constitution. It is remarkable: the referendum was approved on a 54% turnout in the Irish Republic by 96% of the people, which show that they had in effect accepted the division of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, it was again approved by the large majority of 71%, on a fairly large turnout of 81%. That was a great contrast to the other devolution referendums in Scotland and Wales, which had rather low turnouts. It showed there was more enthusiasm in Northern Ireland for that settlement than there was in Scotland and Wales. In Wales, it was just over 50% voting. The large majority shows the agreement must have been approved by both communities – the majority Unionists and the minority Nationalists.

Now, as a result of all this, elections were held to a new Assembly in Northern Ireland in 1998. However, as you know, this has not been the end of it and it is taken nine years to get the Assembly working. Various problems arose and it has in fact been suspended four times before yesterday because of the difficulties of getting bitter opponents to work together. It now seems as if it may work, and a lot has been said in the press about the bribes, to use a crude word, that have been offered to Ian Paisley to get him to agree – extra monies in Northern Ireland etc. But I think there is another important factor: the British Government said that if devolution does not work this time then it would be permanently suspended and Northern Ireland would revert not to direct rule but what they called joint stewardship by the British and Irish Governments, because it will have been shown that Northern Ireland cannot govern itself and will have to be governed from outside. A joint stewardship is not exactly joint sovereignty, but nevertheless the Unionists would be much more frightened of that than they would of agreeing to an internal settlement with Gerry Adams. I think that was actually a much more important factor than the money: they were told this is your last chance, and if you do not agree, we will bring the Irish Government in and you will not have a return to direct rule.

However, even if devolution is restored, that is not the end of the problem, and I think the press are mistaken in giving the impression that it is, because the coalition government that is going to be formed is one that unites two very diverse extremes. The question then is whether they actually be able to get together on the day-to-day business of legislation to put together a serious political programme, or whether stagnation is not more likely.

An even more serious problem is this: suppose at the end of the four years people say, “Well, alright, we are in favour of peace but we are a bit tired of this Government. We would like another one.” There is no other Government. There is no alternative Government in Northern Ireland. It is, in a way, a suspension of the normal democratic framework, because you cannot get it in Northern Ireland since you have no alternating or alternative majority. Therefore people have to be governed, as it were, by Paisley and Gerry Adams forever and ever, roughly. There can be no alternation. There might be a slight alteration in the balance in the Assembly, but not very much. This does not make it easy to see how you could get good Government going if there is really no alternative. The important question here is whether a democracy can operate without an alternative Government.

Therefore, from that point of view, I think it is a mistake to believe that the conflict has ended. Perhaps it can never end but at least it is now carried out in a non-violent form, and what seemed impossible a decade ago is actually happening. Perhaps even a few years ago you would not have believed that Paisley would be sitting down with Gerry Adams, and that the IRA would renounce violence and accept the rule of democracy to accept a place in what they used to call a “Six County Assembly” because they never recognised Northern Ireland. It is fair to say, in the midst of the euphoria, that all this could have been achieved over 30 years ago when the Heath Government set up a very similar power sharing arrangement in Northern Ireland in 1973/4. But that was defeated by direct action by the Unionist Protestant workers which Ian Paisley supported, the only case since the War of a strike altering something major like this where the Government was brought down. Thus Ian Paisley, I believe, bears responsibility for the defeat of all the power sharing arrangements over a period of 30 years, and for igniting religious hatreds; whereas the IRA, or Sinn Fein, could have got places in the Six County Assembly at any time if they had been prepared to renounce violence over the past 30 years. They said they were fighting for something different, not to recognise the Six Counties body, but to get a united Ireland, perhaps to bond people into a united Ireland, to create a united Ireland by force.

Perhaps the best comment about it all has been made to me by someone from Northern Ireland. He said, “The Unionists are too foolish to realise that they have won, and the Nationalists are too clever to admit that they have lost.” That might be the best comment on this whole saga.