

 THE INDEPENDENT

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Hope for healing

AT THE beginning of this century, W B Yeats wrote: "Out of Ireland have we come, / Great hatred, little room, / Maimed us at the start." The poet's pessimism may seem to have been confirmed this week by the litany of death in Warrington and Northern Ireland. There is a sense of *déjà vu*: shock like that which followed the 1987 Remembrance Sunday bombing in Enniskillen. However, there is also similar hope, raised by ensuing popular revulsion, that the initiative can be taken from the men and women of violence.

The difficulty of that task was underlined last weekend when the *Independent on Sunday* published alarming statistics showing that segregation of Catholics and Protestants is increasing year by year. Northern Ireland is heading for a type of apartheid, in which Protestants and Catholics have little personal contact. A 20-year-old policy of integration, supposedly fostering understanding and co-operation, lies in tatters. The two communities, partly in fear of violence, have retreated into their ghettos and their separate schools. It is in these highly segregated areas, not mixed housing, that the paramilitaries live.

The conventional wisdom has been that political progress in Northern Ireland must await a new generation of leaders, when pragmatists will succeed the likes of Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams. Social movements suggest that this may be delusory. The siege mentality of these politicians seems grimly in step with their people. So talks convene and fail with monotonous regularity.

It is tempting to look to another model for political progress. Brendan O'Leary, of the London School of Economics, has made a strong case for a hybrid state in Northern Ireland, embracing the national aspirations of both communities. He suggests that sovereignty should be shared between the Irish and British governments, which would create an executive comprising appointees from the Republic, Great Britain and elected representatives from Northern Ireland.

The argument goes that such an arrangement would neutralise Republicanism, while reassuring Protestants that, even if they were one day outnumbered by Catholics, they would always remain part of the UK. As Catholics now comprise more than 40 per cent of the population, Protestants gain little reassurance from Westminster's promise that Northern Ireland stays in the UK unless the majority votes to leave.

The danger of such a proposal is chronic Loyalist violence, springing from a fear that "shared sovereignty" or "joint authority" will be followed by the final dreaded move: unification. The IRA might similarly regard it as a moment of transition and therefore spend another bloody 30 years in "one last heave". However, at last there might be a government, with legitimacy founded in both communities, that could claim the authority to root out the paramilitaries. This widespread legitimacy is vital for perhaps ruthless policies that will be needed against terrorism.

Without this authority a crackdown, including, for example, the internment provisions advocated yesterday by Conor Cruise O'Brien, would have an unacceptable level of political risk. The

combination of tough measures and institutional reform is needed if the Irish and British governments are not to appear panicked by paramilitary violence.

The proposal for some type of joint authority arrangement is gaining ground. For many, it is a logical extension of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The easy argument in favour is that Northern Ireland's politics is dead. Conversely, opponents warn that joint authority will in fact deal that death blow. Neither claim grasps the complexity of the truth. In reality, politics is not dead, just dying, in Northern Ireland. The British and Irish governments, despite their chummy Anglo-Irish meetings, are at least partly to blame. Many within Northern Ireland accuse the Irish and British sides of complacency and being hopelessly out of touch. They suggest a need for a little more self-criticism.

On the Irish side, too little has been done to reassure the Unionists that the republic will renounce its territorial claim on Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, Sir Patrick Mayhew, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has failed to offer firm leadership, one day apparently making overtures to Sinn Fein, the next talking like an integrationist. The British government also still does not appreciate how much it fuels the IRA by not adopting human rights measures. As long as the Government is seen to be acting above the law and failing to protect Catholics from violence, there will be a moral ambivalence among Catholics towards the IRA.

One sign of hope that Northern Ireland politics is not dead is the massive response to an independent "citizen's inquiry" into the conflict, being conducted in Belfast by Torkel Opsahl, a Norwegian expert on human rights. He has so far received 550 submissions and will report in June. Such activity confounds the pessimistic view that Northern Ireland's problems are incomprehensible and insoluble.

The Opsahl Commission points to a danger of the Anglo-Irish process and its possible development into a joint authority. The commission's creation was by thinkers in Northern Ireland who want more opportunity to talk about the future. Irish and British governments, weary of negotiating with the locals, must not freeze out this generation and exacerbate the already dangerous separation of the communities. Joint authority could easily turn into "Diplock government", with minimal participation from the people of Northern Ireland.

The task of Irish and British governments should rather be first, to eliminate the fears and distrust their actions still create in loyalists and nationalists; second, through some constitutional hybrid, to try to express the different identities of the communities, without destroying the domestic political landscape. That means fighting against the trend of increasing segregation, to promote integration, understanding and pluralism. The thousand people who gathered in Belfast yesterday to mourn the death of Johnathan Bal show there is still a chance for healing after Yeats's maimed beginning.