

# Dear Secretary of State

**Belfast Telegraph - 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2001**

Your recent reflections on Unionist alienation delivered at Liverpool University and on BBC's 'Hearts and Minds' demand a reply. Although your thoughts were measured, they were also wrong in key respects and are more likely to be viewed by Unionists as patronising rather than reassuring.

Your view is that we have much to learn from devolution elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Inclusiveness coupled with diversity are, you say, the central tenets of the modern British State. The Belfast Agreement offers us an opportunity to have equality between those who feel Irish and those who feel British.

You added: "Now that is exactly the position in Scotland, its exactly the position in Wales, where people feel a Scottish or Welsh identity but nevertheless because they are allowed to have that identity they have equal rights, then they are more content to live within a modern United Kingdom."

Your view of what you consider was needed in Northern Ireland was very clear. We should not stay "locked in a barren struggle and pursuing a future which is a mirror of the past". We need to move away from a world in which symbols are predominant and where "everything from flags to language becomes a weapon".

Above all you argue that: "Northern Ireland needs more leaders who can share publicly a vision of a new society. Leaders who do not see every issue as a proxy for fighting the barren constitutional battles."

Much of this will be viewed as superficial by a large section of unionist opinion. Even where these criticisms may be an accurate portrayal of a part of unionist society, to apply them to all is a gross distortion of reality.

Parity of esteem is solidly built into our society and most people accept this. What concerns a wider section of unionist opinion is not cultural identity but the constitutional position. For example, what they experience is the UK Government steadily dismantling the symbols of the State.

Your speech and interview clearly confuse culture and constitution. Such confusion is unnecessary, and is absent throughout continental Europe where there is a well-worn and widely accepted approach to dealing with problems of national identity similar to our own.

Since the end of the Second World War an array of international agreements and conventions have been drawn up and signed at both European and global level to define the rights of citizens within States and on the obligations of States towards them.

What these agreements do is firstly to respect the territorial integrity of the State - boundaries may occasionally change but only by peaceful means (for example Germany). Secondly, they provide maximum guarantees for the free expression of the cultural identities of all groups within States.

Your views are clearly outside the mainstream of European thinking and I suggest that you read the Council of Europe's Convention on diversity and identity within a State. The Labour Government ratified this in February 1998.

You will find that there is a difference drawn between cultural and constitutional identity. Cultural identity is defined by the Council of Europe as one's religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage. Where in Northern Ireland, may I ask, is anyone's cultural identity denied?

Differing allegiance, not difficulties in expressing cultural identity, has been the core problem in Northern Ireland. This is a problem that has not gone away. As you say, too many unionists fear that the UK Government's guarantee of Northern Ireland's constitutional position is "spineless and perfidious". Your need is to make clear that this is not the case.

You seem to imply that Unionism places undue emphasis on the symbols of Britishness. I would agree entirely if you reserved your viewpoint to, for example, 'in your face flag waving'. The role of the national flag, for example, in its proper place is however different. It is not flown to express personal/cultural identity but to symbolise the State; a function recognised throughout the democratic world.

You say we are the same as Scotland! Visit the Scottish Executive's HQ in Brussels and you will find that three flags constantly fly; the Union Flag, the EU flag and the Scottish flag. When there are visiting dignitaries to Scottish Parliamentary buildings, the Union flag together with the visitor's National flag are displayed.

Examine the cap badge of each police constabulary in Scotland (or Wales) and note the constantancy of the Crown. Do you recall the official opening of the Scottish Parliament on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1999? Have we had a similar opening? And, unlike all Scots, we cannot either join or vote for your party that governs the UK. Do you still say we reflect "exactly the position in Scotland"?

You probably have now concluded that I am, by your standards, a narrow-minded bigoted Unionist who thinks too much about symbolism. Let me make it clear, I have always had a vision of an inclusive society for Northern Ireland ever since I was Brian Faulkner's election agent in the early 1970's, and a strong supporter of the ill-fated power-sharing Executive of 1974.

I continue to advocate, and wish to see implemented, international norms for the protection and development of all identities within Northern Ireland. I have no desire to seek to define cultural identity, and associated rights, in any restrictive manner.

However Dr. Reid, the UK Government's actions in incorrectly implementing the aspects of The Belfast Agreement for which it has responsibility does leave me, and many unionists, with the feeling that Northern Ireland is becoming a cold house for Unionism. If a moderate unionist like myself is concerned you will have to try much harder to convince the majority.

**Dermot Nesbitt**