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TOGETHER – BUILDING A UNITED COMMUNITY

The disunited NI Executive has published a strategy document “Together: Building a United Community” which in its title and content is hypocritical, inconsistent, self-defeating and futile in that it fails to name and address the very division, and its fundamental cause, which disunites our community, and implicitly recognizes that the division will remain, however tolerant and respectful of “the other side” we might become. The strategy might result in a reluctantly “Shared Territory”, but never in a “United Community”. Like the “Good Friday Agreement”, the strategy and document is an exercise in political pussyfooting.

If the political parties and individual politicians cannot lead by example by coming “Together” and demonstrating a “United” political/national identity, a “United” personal and party rejection and condemnation of religious bigotry and hatred, and demonstrate a common aspiration for the common good, how in all honesty can they claim to be “Together: Building a United Community” or ask the population to be so?

How can we possibly heal the religio-political division in Northern Ireland and form a united community when we have so many institutions, legitimate and otherwise, which reflect, exacerbate and perpetuate the division, and which rely on the division for their very existence?

We have the parading Orders, the marching bands, the paramilitary groups, the different Christian denominations, the separate school systems, the “We’re Not Irish” ethnic identity movement, the opposing political parties, a disunited Assembly and a disunited Executive.

The document advocates tolerance and respect for the other's identity and viewpoint, but tolerance has its limits, and Protestantism, by definition, and in actuality for many in Northern Ireland, does not respect Roman Catholicism. Unionists do not tolerate the Republican aspiration for a united Ireland. Republicans do not tolerate perpetual union with Britain. Catholic tolerance of Protestant bigotry reached its limit with the Civil Rights Movement in 1968/69.

Do we want a bi-cultural, bi-political, two communities population forever at loggerheads over religious and national identity or do we want an integrated united community with a mutually accepted identity and a common aspiration for the common good?

A stable bi-cultural, bi-political, two communities population in the Northern Ireland context is a non-viable concept, and has been so from the inception of Northern Ireland. Even Edward Carson acknowledged this fact. So, short of ethnic cleansing or re-Partition and transference of populations, how do we now forge an integrated united community with a mutually accepted identity and common aspiration?

Firstly we must deal with the elephant in the room, the problem that is never addressed head on, no less so than in the strategy document, – the religious divide and the fact that Unionism/Loyalism is motivated by a form of Protestantism with a residual mediaeval anti-Catholic ethos institutionalized in the British monarchy. The monarchy can thus be added to the list of divisive institutions.

Noticeably, the churches have not been included in any of the initiatives proposed in the document. Was it politically dangerous to ask the churches to come “Together” and “Build a United Church/Community”? Did the politicians and their parties fear that they would lose their mandates if such unity came about? Or

was it perhaps considered to be futile? Why have the custodians of religious difference, the church leaders, never come together of their own volition? Has Jesus (if he ever in fact existed) been eclipsed by Christianity in its many forms?

If our united community is to be based on and guided by Christian values and principles we need a clear definition, and common understanding and acceptance, of those values and principles. To define those values and principles, and to educate the population in them, we need a common form of Christianity combining the best in Catholicism with the best in Protestantism, and the best in other religions with similar values and principles which have a significant adherence in Northern Ireland.

So Churchmen, get off your backsides, throw off your denominational straitjackets, put your heads together and do the Christian, social and morally responsible thing. Distil your denominations to their basic common values and principles and produce a commonly acceptable form of Christianity (Reformation 2). Surely with the help of “God” that is possible, if there is a “god”. If “God” declines to help you must do it yourselves. If there is no “god” we need neither Catholicism nor Protestantism nor any other religion. We need a commonly agreed social moral code. Perhaps you should consider re-interring Christ and resurrecting Jesus who, in his lifetime (if he ever in fact existed), provided such a code in very few words before he was posthumously christified and deified by Paul and his gospel writer associates (simple Jesuanity rather than Christianity with its contentious interpretations and forms).

With the religious difference removed, the divisive institutions become irrelevant and unnecessary and the political question becomes less fraught. Union with Britain and its Protestant constitution becomes less of an imperative for erstwhile Protestants /Unionists/Loyalists, while reunification with the now less Catholic

South becomes less pressing for erstwhile Catholics, now no longer a downtrodden and barely tolerated minority in a Protestant statelet.

An aspiration for a united Ireland might of course remain in some quarters, but the vast majority, now an integrated, united, non-sectarian community, could choose on practical, non-emotive issues whether to remain with the UK, or to seek union with the Republic, or to be independent of both. Extremists on both sides of the divide, and their religious and political representatives, fear such a harmonious scenario. They, together with institutions and other vested interests, will do their utmost to impede and prevent it coming into being.

Given the Republic's current disaffection with the institutional Roman church, people there might welcome and adopt a rationalized form of religion, or a social moral code, thereby removing an emotive obstacle to integration with the North. It remains to be seen if possible changes which might be introduced by the new Pope Francis might help to bridge the Catholic-Protestant divide.

Meanwhile, the process of serious and effective religious and social reconciliation and integration should be started here and now, with or without "God's" help.

With "God's" help, pigs, and elephants, might fly.