CITIZENSHIP IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY

THE STEVENSON LECTURE ON CITIZENSHIP

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Citizenship is one of the more complex concepts in political theory. I am not pretending to be a theorist. But I hope I have something significant to say as a practitioner who has spent most of his adult life attempting to establish a genuine democracy and citizenship in my part of the world. It is much easier to recognise the absence of citizenship than to define what it means. That, perhaps, is why so much attention is paid to the idea throughout Western Europe. It is now an issue because it can no longer be taken for granted, even where democracy is deep-rooted and genuine.

If I had to sum up the idea of citizenship in a sentence, I would say - the recognition within a society that what unites its members is more important than that which divides them. The diverse interests and identities within a society find a way of allowing their differences to be expressed and transcended, while ensuring that everyone feels that they are being fairly treated.

Such a concept of citizenship relies on a threefold combination of identity, identification and integration. First, while recognising the clash of interests within society, there must be some degree of common identity between its citizens. Second, the vast majority of citizens must identify with the political institutions by which they are governed. Third, there must be a sense of integration within the political system so that people feel a part of the process by which collective decisions are taken about collective futures. They must also feel that improvements and remedies can be brought about through political action.

In the mainstream of European politics, citizenship has in practice depended on these factors. Being more specific, postwar Western Europe has until recently based itself on four pillars: democratic control over government and policy; the welfare state; the legal equality of all citizens; and a balance between rights and responsibilities. In recent years, this postwar settlement has been called into question by the rise of right-wing economic and political theories that reduce citizenship to consumerism.

This reductionism is one of the greatest threats to citizenship. A citizen is not just a consumer, he or she is also a producer, a taxpayer, a parent, a child, a voter, a political activist, a voluntary worker, etc. The list is endless. A citizen has a wide and diverse range of interests and personas, which may well be sometimes in conflict with one other. A citizen has a combination of economic, social, political and moral needs. We cannot, in a democracy, reduce individuals to monomaniac Sunday shoppers. It seems to me that the greatest danger facing our democracies is the effort to force people into the straitjacket of simplistic labels. For example, we should recognise that altruism is as essential to our societies as self-interest.

It is relatively easy to be a citizen in a political system that takes responsibility for offsetting the negative effects of market economics without destroying initiative and enterprise. Where government is dedicated to using reason and policy to improving the lives and opportunities of its citizens, it is reasonable for people to assume that they do and should have a say in what happens to them. Where government either cannot or refuses to act, the purpose of politics becomes much more obscure. (This is an important distinction between "can't and won't" because it covers two arguments - the extent to which government per se can intervene and the correct level of government that should intervene. I will return to this issue). But if the purpose of politics becomes obscure, so then the validity and usefulness of citizenship become problematical.

Similarly, the welfare state has been an essential element in the postwar era in bringing about acceptable conditions for all citizens, some degree of equality of opportunity and mitigating substantive inequality sufficiently to provide the basis for a broad consensus in most political systems. It would be hard to deny the historic connection between the rise of the nation and the welfare states. Indeed, certain anti-Europeans justify their position in terms of defending the welfare state, an argument that I regard as backward looking but which has a certain degree of plausibility. Again I must return to this point. However, it is clear that the problems of the welfare state, by throwing more and more people into poverty and social isolation, undermine the belief of many of our fellow citizens

that they can call themselves such.

Furthermore, while it is important to distinguish between legal equality and substantive equality, if the gap between rich, poor and comfortable becomes too wide, there will clearly be social consequences. Equal rights for all citizens is the basis of any form of citizenship and democracy. But if equal rights become in practice theoretical because people, through poverty, ill-health, lack of access to education, cannot exercise their formal rights, the consequent degree of alienation precludes the possibility of citizenship.

Rights and responsibilities have to be balanced if people are to maintain a sense of identification with and integration into the political system. For many years a sterile argument has raged largely between liberals and conservatives about the preeminence of rights over responsibilities. One of the encouraging things in British politics recently is that the debate is becoming much more sophisticated with more and more people realising that the competing left and right conventional wisdoms are simplistic. I believe that rights and responsibilities are inextricably interlinked. Without rights there are no responsibilities. Without responsibilities there are no rights. It is the erosion of social and economic rights that has caused much of the social breakdown we all lament. We cannot expect responsibility from people who feel they have no rights. But neither will people exercise their legitimate rights unless they have a sense of responsibility for their own futures. Control and self-control are Siamese twins.

Given these threats to the possibility of citizenship, I believe that we have to get away from the idea of subjects who should conform to the dictates of existing political systems. We need rather to reform political institutions so that they repose on the energies and enthusiasms of our peoples, not on their resignation and despair. That may mean substantial changes, particularly in these islands.

You will have noticed that I have yet to address the second issue in the title of my lecture. This is because I wanted to place the issue of divided societies, and my own in particular, in the wider context of developments in European society.

Since I have consistently argued that the conflict in Northern Ireland originated as a result of the European wars of the seventeenth century and that it can only be resolved in the wider context of political and economic progress in Europe, it is important to describe the general problems facing all our societies. By doing so, I hope to show the possibilities and the difficulties that exist for us in Ireland.

The first general remark I would like to make is that there is no reason why a divided society should be a violent one. Indeed, there is no reason it should suffer from political conflict more than a homogeneous one. There are many examples of divided societies where arrangements have been agreed which allow the different sections of the community to work and live together. For example, the divisions between French-speakers and Flemish-speakers are accommodated within Belgium. Similarly, the conflict between Madrid and Catalonia has been accommodated within Spain. The violent prewar divisions between Catholics and Socialists in Austria have been overcome, while the traditional conflict in the Netherlands between Catholics, Protestants and Socialists has been transcended. Indeed, the European Union itself is a classic example of the way in which divided societies can work together peacefully, without abandoning their different identities.

The one thing all these successful attempts at conflict resolution have in common is that these divided communities recognised the legitimacy of the position of their counterparts and set up structures that, by guaranteeing equality for all citizens, permitted the existence of a common citizenship. The essential element of their success has been to replace the concept of division with that of diversity.

From my earlier remarks, it should be clear what has been missing in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland did not benefit from the enlightened political leadership shown in mainland Europe, nor from the attitude of mutual recognition of difference and diversity.

As for citizenship, none of the criteria I mentioned above, equality, identity, identification and integration existed. To make matters worse, these factors were absent in a particularly vicious fashion.

I used to think that Northern Ireland was divided into first and second class citizens. I was being unduly optimistic. In reality, there were only second and third class citizens. While unionists held the upper hand, one only has to look at the general economic failure of Northern Ireland and the widespread poverty in unionist communities that continues to exist to see that unionist domination did not serve the real interests of its supporters. But in a relatively poor society, these are genuine differences in the degree of deprivation experienced by the two traditions. So discrimination and inequality were real and extremely political dangerous. The failure of the government of Northern Ireland to promote equality, coupled with the subsequent failure of the British government to put a stop to inequality, lead directly to the twenty-five years of violence from which we have just emerged. Any realistic political settlement must ensure that we have equality between our traditions.

Neither have we been able to develop any sense of common identity. One of the major elements in this has been the absence of equality, not just in the social and economic fields but also in terms of politics. While both communities have had their own political identities, they have not been given equal respect by the political authorities. The issue of parity of esteem for unionist and nationalist is crucial for the development of citizenship in our society. I am hopeful that we will succeed in establishing the equal legitimacy, mutually recognised, of the two traditions. The Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985 made a start in this respect, and the commitment of the British government to parity of esteem in the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 is a significant step towards full equality.

There has also been a failure to develop political institutions with which all our people can identify and to which all our citizens can give their allegiance. Since 1972, the unionist community has not even had the consolation of its own government and political institutions. Since the introduction of direct rule, we

have been governed by ministers from Britain (almost all being English) Direct rule has been everyone's least worst option but it is not a system of government that is ultimately acceptable to anyone. It has pernicious effects both in terms of accountability of government and for developing the political talents within Northern Ireland needed to operate any future political arrangements which may be agreed. With a system of government that effectively marginalises all politicians in Northern Ireland, it is difficult to imagine how a genuine concept of citizenship can take root.

Finally, neither tradition is integrated into either its ideal nor the existing political system. No political party in the North plays a part in its government. Neither tradition can make the government accountable to it. But we cannot create accountability except by agreement between our divided peoples. Obviously, neither of our traditions will allow the other to dominate it. So clearly we need a comprehensive agreement on new structures which we will operate together, while recognising our differences.

I hope I have shown the overwhelming need for equality in divided societies. I would like to try and extend the argument a little further. We know that equality and parity of esteem are crucial in making sure that differences can be accommodated in divided societies of the traditional type: that is to say societies divided by nationality, ethnicity, religion or language. I would just like to reflect on the implications of growing inequality in the new type of divided society - that divided by speed, the so-called two-speed society. In this kind of divided society, which seems to be becoming more and more characteristic of Western countries, the principal division is between skilled and educated people in relatively secure employment working in the more advanced industries and the unskilled, low-paid, unemployed, socially marginal sections of the population.

I am not for a minute suggesting that one can make tendentious extrapolations from the experience of Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is probably extremely unlikely that the social exclusion of perhaps one third of the population would lead to ~~any~~ very serious violence in most countries. I suspect such a situation would

be more likely to breed resignation in most countries. But it does help the likes of Jean-Marie Le Pen.

But there are some parallels. In Northern Ireland, we do not simply face the prospect of creating new political arrangements, we have a society to recreate. Political marginalisation, long-term unemployment and social exclusion have led to a degree of social breakdown that threatens not only those personally affected but the health of our society as a whole. Many of the same social problems of community breakdown are also apparent in Britain and the rest of Europe. I simply do not believe we can have any real form of citizenship if we are prepared to allow entire communities and millions of individuals to go to the wall. That is why I believe that defending equality and the welfare state is to defend democracy. In that sense, defending the welfare state is an act of self-interest for all of us.

Having said that, it is also obvious that we will have to find new ways of doing so. That is the next question - what do we have to do to create the circumstances where citizenship will be real?

In my view, the political institutions we have inherited from the past must undergo substantial reform. We are walking backwards into the twenty-first century with the institutions of the nineteenth century to guide us. The idea that the nation-states and governments are the creators and guarantors of equal citizenship is out of date. Indeed, the present debate over the future of the European Union is essentially between those who think traditional systems can be maintained and those who recognise the need to modernise methods of government.

I will begin with the outlook for Northern Ireland before looking at the wider picture in Europe. Northern Ireland is a classic and tragic case of the divided society that failed to accommodate its differences. The result has been a division of society into second and third class citizens, with everyone losing because of the conflict. Northern Ireland has suffered from the absence of democratic

government, from an underdeveloped economy and from social dislocation and alienation. The present political climate will help to come to terms with that legacy. There is now an opportunity to create a society in which everyone will be a first class citizen.

That does not mean uniformity. In a divided society, the only way to provide equal citizenship is by recognising the existence of different identities and to put in place structures that treat people differently but equally. I emphasise the equally in case anyone should mistake this for a modern form of apartheid. For instance, we must ensure that institutions give parity of esteem to the British and Irish identities in our region.

The cessations of violence in the autumn of 1994 have transformed the political and social environment in which we live. I have repeatedly insisted on the need to put the past behind us. At last we can do that, and turn our serious attention to the future.

We face several challenges, political, economic and social. We will have to resolve many divisive and threatening problems before Northern Ireland can become a modern democratic and prosperous society in the European mainstream. I am confident that we can do so, provided we address ourselves to the real questions.

Most vital of all is that we should now channel the energies of our political parties and institutions and of our people into practical forms of cooperation that will provide benefits for all. We must now concentrate on the tasks that confront us, as well as the rest of Western society. Foremost among these will be the task of ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to make a positive contribution to society, to take part in the productive economy, to enjoy reasonable standards of living, and to acquire the levels of skill needed to guide our societies into the economy of the 21st century. That will be equal citizenship.

As an example of practical cooperation, I would cite the European Union special initiative for Northern Ireland and the border counties. The European Union is poised to make a substantial contribution to the regeneration of both economy and society in Northern Ireland.

This is not just a question of financial support, welcome though that is. The Programme has so far shown what is possible, in terms of real social and economic proposals when parties, without abandoning their principles, do cooperate across the political divide. In the European Parliament, three of the parties from Northern Ireland are represented. All three of us were able to agree a common position, and to secure the unanimous support of our fellow Parliamentarians from all member states and from all political horizons for the type of EU programme we believed necessary.

Our region will therefore benefit from such practical cooperation, precisely because our parties could, while maintaining our political principles, concentrate on the issues that unite us. This does not mean that we do not have to face up to the reality of the deep divisions that exist. Nevertheless, it does mean that we should not allow them to paralyse cooperation on our common interests. Furthermore, I believe that we will have more chance of creating a comprehensive and durable political agreement if we acquire greater experience in working together on the questions that do not separate us.

One of the great challenges we face is changing the way in which we think about the nature of political institutions and their relationship with the citizen. Northern Ireland has been a society very much based on top-down administration. Where other parts of Europe have had politics, we have had administration. As a result, citizens have been seen, and see themselves, as the objects of administration, not as active makers of their own destiny.

That attitude must change if our region is going to succeed in the next century. We need active citizens and producers. We need problem-solvers, not problem-posers. We need forms of organisation that can enhance and exploit the ideas and

talents of our citizens, not ones that rein them in. We can be optimistic since these factors do exist in some measure in Ireland. We have many dynamic and innovative organisations and individuals, many of whose achievements have been obscured and overshadowed by the violent conflict from which we are emerging. These are the real citizens of the future. Today, we have a serious opportunity, one never available to previous generations, to create a society in Ireland that both major traditions can call their own.

The only way we can extricate ourselves from the hole we have been digging for ourselves for so long is by agreement. By definition, agreement must be mutual. Just as it is impossible for unionists to impose a solution on nationalists, nationalists cannot impose their preferences on unionists. My party, since its foundation, has devoted itself to winning acceptance of that principle in both Ireland and Britain, a principle now enshrined in the Downing Street Declaration and in the Framework document.

The principle of agreement is fundamental to the future of our society. The Declaration and the Framework document as well as subsequent statements by the Irish and British governments, and by all the political parties in these islands, have made that clear. The principle is now accepted by all parties to the conflict. There is no question of imposing blueprints or compulsion to accept political institutions. The nationalist community knows what it is like to live under institutions that do not command its respect and allegiance. It would undermine the moral force of our claim for political arrangements to which we can give our full consent if we sought to deny unionists the same right.

The agreement that is so necessary if we are to create an acceptable political system can be only reached by cooperation between our two traditions. We must negotiate without preconditions and presuppositions. The results of eventual negotiations must be submitted to the people for their endorsement. This principle, recognised by both the Irish and British governments, is obviously the best guarantee that either tradition can ask for. The need for ratification by the people is clearly the best bulwark against the imposition of unacceptable

arrangements. As I have often said, the real guarantor of the status of the unionist tradition is its numbers, its geography and its weight in the life of our island. Both governments are now clearly committed to respecting the rights of both our communities. There is no excuse to pretend that any of us will have anything imposed upon us over our heads. The essence of stability is the acceptance of diversity.

Our destiny is now in our own hands. We have a mutual responsibility to each other and to ourselves to build upon the present advantageous political climate. We must ensure that never again will our differences be expressed by the gun, by the bomb or by the abuse of power. Unionists and nationalists must work together to pursue our common interests, and expand the common ground between us so that the foundations of a new democratic era in Ireland can be laid.

Turning now to the wider European picture, we have to recognise the inadequacy of the existing state system in dealing with the problems facing our societies. There is a legitimate debate about the frontiers of the state and how much political action can achieve. But I find the debate in Britain extremely Anglocentric. It is assumed that because the powers of the British state in an era of globalisation are limited, that we cannot find other methods of controlling our destinies. We cannot equate the ultimate failure of the nation-state in the present day with the failure of politics.

But in Europe, there are much more wide-ranging debates, where we are striving to develop new policies and institutions for the future - ones that will have a grasp on an internationalised economy and a global society.

I would argue that politics and the role of the citizen remains as important as ever. To preserve and enhance the reality of citizenship in modern society, new and more complex forms of political institutions will be required. A balance must be struck between international, European, national and regional levels of decision-making.

As a public representative and professional politician, I am constantly struck by the relative lack of interest in media-driven politics at member state level, and the vigour with which many people who would count themselves as apathetic about nation-state politics, participate in the lives of their communities. I see every day people putting together new initiatives to improve their communities, and indeed to contribute to the improvement of conditions elsewhere in the world. That energy has to be harnessed to the political system, unless our political institutions are to become completely marginalised.

It is obvious that the nation-state on its own in the late twentieth century cannot respond to the economic, social, environmental, technological and political challenges that we face. The lasting legacy of Jacques Delors will be his insistence that the European institutions and the member state governments address this reality.

I believe that we are entering a post-nationalist world where the nation-state on its own is simultaneously too small and too big to be an effective means of delivering the essentials of any political system: economic development; social progress; and the moral and physical security of its citizens. The real task of politics in the next century will be to find ways in which the reality, not the appearance, of the sovereignty of the people will be upheld. For me, the sovereignty of the people can only mean the right of peoples to control their own destinies, to respect each other rights, and to guarantee that most subversive of principles - the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That principle was established by the first real citizens in the world, and still retains its validity.

The priority for the European Union must be to enhance the embryonic concept of European citizenship admitted by the Maastricht Treaty. We have to democratize and streamline the EU so that its operations are visible and comprehensible to the interested citizen. We have to elaborate a European strategy for growth and employment, enhance the social dimension of European decision-making, and set the foundations for a European welfare state.

At the same time, we must move towards the Europe of the regions. A key element in the search for an effective European democracy will be the advance of decentralisation. Perhaps the most compelling argument in favour of decentralisation is that the decentralised levels of government with proper political and financial autonomy will help to give the state a human face, thus encouraging the active participation of citizens.

Outside of Ireland and Britain, one of the most noticeable political trends of the last thirty years has been the progress made towards the regionalisation of political power structures. Germany has a federal system with extensive powers for the 15 old Landers, the six new ones from the former GDR and for Berlin. Spain has 17 regions or autonomous provinces. Italy has 20. Belgium is moving towards a three-way federal system with power dispersed to Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels region. France has 26 regional councils. All these bodies are elected.

The other member states have a variety of provisions, which are often not uniform throughout the state but which vary to take specific problems into account. Only in Britain and Ireland is there almost total opposition to decentralisation.

I do not believe that it is an accident that many of the richest parts of Europe have strong regional institutions. By liberating individuals and communities from the straitjacket of excessive centralisation, by reducing the social and geographical distance between citizens and the administration and by enhancing the variety of flexible responses, energies have been channelled into the search for innovation, efficiency, employment and prosperity. Regions have been able to mobilise their own resources, rather than have to rely on lobbying central government for largesse.

Decentralisation of power and responsibility to relevant sub-national units would be a step forward. It would encourage constructive participation in decision-making and in development strategies. The more people are responsible for their