

Realism Will Pay

With the tribal refugee leadership steered in India by Upendral Chakma meeting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka on Friday the air has been cleared for the talks to resume along meaningful lines between the PCJSS and the National Committee on CHT. The protracted negotiations having now reached a fact-finding stage there is obviously a great need on both sides to embrace realism, but for the tribal leaders it is a practical necessity that they ask the extremists in their ranks to defunctionalise their stance on autonomy and settlement. Why should they still cling to distrust of a national government and their Bengali compatriots who, like the majority in the tribal population today are keen on ushering in a new era of harmonious relationship between the two communities?

At least that is what our hill people deserve after their nightmarish sense of alienation from the broader Bangladesh society primarily originating in the Kaptai Dam that, more than three decades ago, displaced so many of them from their hearths and homes.

One wrong cannot be righted by another wrong — that is the lesson they must be prepared to learn from their insurrection-laden history much as our own role in the CHT has albeit evolved over the years to a point of mellowed, winsome maturity. This is the right time, the right nick so to speak to forge peace on the hills by a spurt of combined accommodation.

No truly democratic government in Bangladesh can go against its grains by allowing a trampling of minority rights of which it is the elected custodian. The tribal leadership in all its forms can only ignore this at the risk of not even knowing where their interests lie.

The government is likely to add some fresh concessions to the rehabilitatory package in the light of the new tribal demands. But insofar as the clamouring for involvement of UNHCR or ICRC in the rehabilitation work, removal of the Bengali settlers from the CHT and total autonomy go, there would have to be a lessening of militancy on the tribal side when the government has no dearth of good intentions.

We are looking for a conclusive round of talks between the National Committee and the PCJSS. Our own demand on both sides is: Let the repatriation process be completed expeditiously to bring the elusive peace to fruition in the CHT.

Her Legacy

Millions mourned on Saturday the last journey of the temporal embodiment of the eternal message of love, humility and kindness as Mother Teresa was laid to rest in the city whose rejected dwellers she loved and served. In life she was too dynamic and expansive to make us pause and ponder over the peculiar strength of her ability. Perhaps death has given us that opportunity.

One writer seemed to have reasoned it better than most when he observed that Mother Teresa packed in herself the combined power of all the leaders around the world simply because of the moral weight she pulled behind her activities. Indeed, the moral foundation of everything she did throughout her life is embedded in our minds. Who will stand by the poor, suffering and unaccommodated? We all feel that there should be some one. But our preoccupation with self weal puts a swift end to those vaster and richer concerns. It is exactly this point, from where we ordinary folks return to our cocoons of self-interest that messiahs like Mother Teresa begin their mission for dedicating life for others.

If the path of the messiahs in the ancient times used to be strewn with many obstacles, even physical affliction due to the hostility of a bigoted people or a cruel despot, modern age did not mean any great change in the general attitude towards them. If there was not open hostility, there was indifference, cynicism and at times suspicion in Mother Teresa's case. Nothing, neither the smallness of her fund — five rupees, nor the cynical scorn of the place she made her home, could deter her. She smiled power out of all indifference, all discouragement as Mother House, the headquarters of her order that accommodates nearly 70,000 people would bear out. She salvaged the message of love and compassion from a time and place when and where it seemed all set to pitch its mansion in the excrement.

Will Mother's death mean the end of hope for the poorest of the poor? We do not think so. There is no doubt her charisma, her magnetism is something that will not be replaced. But the remarkable ability people showed at Mother's death in keeping selfishness and base thoughts away and in tearfully appreciating Mother's work tells that her legacy will live.

Very Awkward

What is wrong with the Dhaka City Corporation? Has it taken some sort of a vow about not doing anything clinically and discreetly? Well, signs are that it has.

As this newspaper reported with visual support yesterday, the DCC's hawk rehabilitation programme has gone awry. Authorities' procrastination and lack of coordination among concerned agencies have resulted in undesirable invasion in the Osmani Uddyan. It was sheer myopia on DCC's part if it had decided to sacrifice a part of the Osmani Uddyan for hawkers' rehabilitation. Dhaka now ranks top among cities notorious for air pollution. Allowing the few green spots and parks to be used for purposes commercial or otherwise is in fact killing whatever little resources we have for neutralising the rising pollution level. Besides, for a swelling population of 90 million, Dhaka has hardly any place where its denizens can go for a simple stroll.

The free-for-all atmosphere prevailing at the Osmani Uddyan is not entirely of the DCC's making though. Front organisation of the ruling Awami League, the Sramik League seems to have contributed sufficiently to the disorderly and chaotic situation.

Faltering relentlessly as it is, DCC owes people an answer as to why it took such a long time to come up with an action plan on this rehabilitation issue?

While urging the DCC to reverse the forcible occupation of a part of the Osmani Uddyan we exhort the government to stop its front organisations from upsetting the system by taking undue privileges of being in power.

Hong Kong: China's New Horizon

What is There for Us to Learn?

LAST June, millions all over the world watched, the ceremonies of the handing over of Hong Kong by Britain to China, on TV. One witnessed that historic moment when with the stroke of the midnight hour between June 30 and July 1, the Union Jack was brought down forever from Hong Kong's flagpole after almost a century-and-a-half, and up went the yellow star spangled red banner of the People's Republic of China. For the Chinese it must have been a moment when time stood still as the British left quietly and with dignity. Among the millions who watched TV that night, there were many who were anxious about Hong Kong's future, after its reunification with China.

I watched the event of that memorable midnight with particular interest not only because Hong Kong was familiar to me since the early '60s when I served in the Pakistan Embassy in Peking (now, Beijing) but also because I was going on a visit to China and Hong Kong soon thereafter. The Hong Kong of the '60s that I knew well, was very much a jewel in the British Crown. Diplomats posted in Beijing visited Hong Kong as often as they could, primarily because it was from there that their daily necessities including household electrical gadgets, personal clothing and even food stuff and the like were purchased. Consumer goods were hard to come by in the China of the '60s. A local observation going round the small diplomatic circle in Beijing saw the diplomats posted there immensely knowledgeable about the shopping areas of Hong Kong, but all in varying degrees of ignorance about China itself.

During the cold war days of the 60s, a peaceful reunification of Hong Kong with China seemed a remote possibility. In any case the mention of reunification mostly signified Taiwan, particularly when things used to get hot and tense along the mainland's eastern sea board bordering Taiwan, which would be unfavourably mentioned in the Chinese media as an integral part of China.

In the 80s, Deng Xiaoping's imaginative policy of "One Country, Two Systems" relaxed tension in the region that helped to accelerated China's astounding economic growth, and made Hong Kong's peaceful reunification with the mother country possible. In fact to Sir Geoffrey Howe, the then British Foreign Secretary, he once expressed the hope that the solution of the Hong Kong question would be an example for other developing nations in settling their internal disputes so that they could focus on development.

Deng Xiaoping viewed the Hong Kong question as a tripartite one involving Hong Kong, China and Britain, the solution of which had to be acceptable to all the three parties. He told Ms Thatcher in October 1984, after the agreement of Hong Kong has been reached, that the people of Hong Kong and Britain would certainly have rejected reunification by imposing socialism on Hong Kong, and that would have led to a turmoil. He told Thatcher that in the event "Hong Kong would have become a bleak city with a host of problems and that is not something we would have wanted." There was, therefore, "no other alternative" to "One Country, Two Systems."

Deng Xiaoping would have only "patriots" for the future government of Hong Kong. But then he had his own very practical definition of patriots. To him the qualifications of a patriot "are respect for the Chinese nation, sincere support for the motherland's resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong and a desire not to impair Hong Kong's prosperity and stability. Those who meet these requirements are patriots, whether they believe in Capitalism or Feudalism or even slavery. We do not demand that they be in favour of China's socialist system; we only ask them to love the motherland and Hong Kong."

In this century China has been lucky in its leaders and in Deng Xiaoping I found one who was eager and capable of objective analysis of a situation, by "gleaning the truth from facts." Thus in his life time he was able to lead the country from one success to another. One wish of Deng Xiaoping sadly will never be fulfilled. He had wished to set foot on the soil of Hong Kong after its reunification with China "even for one minute" and "even if it has to be on a wheel chair." Death robbed him of his wish, but Hong Kong forever will remain as a memorial of far-sightedness and sagacity of this great leader.

In the early 60s, I had the opportunity of meeting Chairman Deng Xiaoping on numerous occasions. One remembered him as a quick witted, sprightly and active Secretary General of the Communist Party playing an important role under the guidance of Chairman Mao and Prime Minister Zhou En Lai in the ideological war against the then Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. And if the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the disintegration of these two countries should indicate as to who indeed had followed the "correct" ideological path — China or those two Federations?

The last time I ever saw Chairman Deng Xiaoping was on July 6, 1985 at Beijing's Great Hall of People when as Foreign Secretary I had accompanied President Ershad on a state visit to China. Deng was 81 then, still chain smoking away. He held no official or party position then. Yet as an ordinary citizen, he was above all his fellow citizens and universally held in the highest respect and esteem.

That was a few months after China's accord with Britain over Hong Kong, in which Deng Xiaoping had played a pivotal role. He was in a relaxed mood and besides touching upon the growing Sino-Bangladesh relations, he outlined a "four d" horizon of the Chinese domestic scene as it then was. Deng Xiaoping maintained that he was no longer very busy as he had left all State and Party duties in the hands of Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang and Party Secretary General Hu Yaobang. He was only "waiting to meet Karl Marx in the other world," though he would like to live "another five years" (in the event he was alive longer than 10 more years). But then he felt that both Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang should also "get ready to pass on the leadership to the younger generation." (After the Tian An Men incident in 1989, Chairman Jeng Zemin and Prime Minister Li Peng succeeded in the top Party and the government respectively).

Looking ahead to the end of the century Deng Xiaoping told us that by then China's per capita income would increase fourfold to sixteen hundred US dollars and that its population would stand at 1.2 billion. He said that China had adopted certain development policies "with regard to the urban areas" and that the "degree of their success would be apparent in two or three years." He was happy that China was making "quick progress" since 1980.

Deng Xiaoping talked of the "four modernisation" policy that China had been pursuing in Agriculture, Industry, Science and Technology and Defence. He was happy that while modernising China's Defence the government was reducing the number of China's armed personnel by millions, bringing their total strength down from 4.2 million to 3.2 million. This he said would help China's development. He respectfully remembered Chairman Mao and Prime Minister Zhao En Lai and said that pursuing the policies laid down by them, "China would never attempt to become a superpower."

During my visit to China last July as a member of a friendship delegation, only days after Hong Kong's return to China, we met Mr Zhou Zu Shou, Director General of Hong Kong and Macao Affairs in the Chinese Foreign Office in Beijing.

He was connected with the formalities of Hong Kong's transfer to China that had taken place only a little more than a fortnight prior to our meeting. He was fully conversant about Bangladesh's much talked about invitation to the transfer ceremonies and had seen our Foreign Minister there but had not talked to him. He said that he would never forget the feeling of the moment when Hong Kong returned to the motherland. "The Chinese people had been waiting for that moment for a century and a half," he said.

While commenting upon the working of "One Country and Two Systems" Mr Zhou Zu Shou told us that the Hong Kong Government was not called upon to contribute anything to China's exchequer. It did not also have to pay for the stationing of troops in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region as did the previous Hong Kong Government in respect of the British troops there. He explained to us that it was in China's interest to abide by the peace accord with Britain as Hong Kong had an important role in China's overall development. China was determined to maintain Hong Kong's stability and prosperity. China needed peace for its progress. Capitalism would remain in Hong Kong for another 50 years but China had no worry on that account. "Water in the street and water in the well do not bother each other" he said, quoting a Chinese proverb.

In his view the United States was keeping Taiwan alive but then Taiwan's reunification with the motherland was "China's internal affair." "It is our matter" he said and no third party had any role in it. However, China sought Taiwan's peaceful reunification. China needed peace for it wanted to maintain its "pace of progress."

After a memorable ten day trip of China I took us about an hour by a ferry boat to reach Hong Kong from the fast developing export city of Zuhai. Zuhai is situated opposite the island of Macao which returns from Portugal's occupation to China, in 1999. The first impression that one had of Hong Kong as one stepped into the city was that it had not changed at all after its transfer to China. A few days stay there only confirmed this impression. The fast developing Zuhai on the mainland is well laid out with a perpetually fresh coat of paint, as it were, and while travelling from there to Hong Kong one does have the feeling of travelling from an evolving scenario to a comparatively settled one. Indeed Zuhai has about it much more of an aura of change than has Hong Kong. People in the mainland evince an interest in foreigners that people in Hong Kong, do not. Hong Kong maintains its old ways: busy and disciplined life of its people, a pleasing coexistence of the English and the Chinese language, and culture. A free and responsible press, shopping centres full of goods, high prices, punctual transport system, glittering evenings, innumerable clubs, restaurants and bars — things are just as they were when the British left. The government, however, is not quite visible in Hong Kong, yet one felt that the foreigners and Chinese alike had full faith in Tung Chee Hua's Administration.

This confidence in the new government has manifested itself in many ways. During the first half of this year the number of foreigners in Hong Kong increased by 18 per cent, whereas any feeling of insecurity would have only driven them away. Interestingly enough, during that period the number of British visitors increased by 23 per cent and Americans by 18 per cent. Among the Asians, Filipino, Indonesia, Thai, Malaysian and Indian populations have increased in varying percentages. The handful of Bangladeshis in Hong Kong remain without any anxiety whatsoever.

In the field of trade and commerce the statistics are positive and hopeful. Hong Kong stock exchange dealings in July was to the tune of \$3.85 billion US dollars. "South China Morning Post" a leading Hong Kong daily recently carried out a survey which showed that 90 per cent of the people surveyed thought that Hong Kong's economic performance was satisfactory whereas 95 per cent had faith in the political future of Hong Kong. Retail sales in July went up by 10 per cent to 19.7 billion US dollars. Purchase of vehicles is a good indicator of the peoples faith in the future and the sale of motor vehicles in Hong Kong has gone up by 20 per cent. The High Court in Hong Kong has recently dismissed a petition questioning the validity of Hong Kong's provisional Assembly and that has quashed once for any lurking political uncertainty.

Deng Xiaoping had wished that developing countries having internal problems should learn from the Hong Kong example. Admittedly, no two situations can be identical, no two problems can be the same. Yet one feels that we in Bangladesh have lessons to learn from China's dealing with the Hong Kong situation. Here one has the Chittagong Hill Tracts in mind.

Bengali-speaking plains people in Bangladesh outnumber the tribals of Chittagong Hill Tracts, as do the mainlanders, the residents of Hong Kong. China has taken great care not to be seen as imposing any solution on Hong Kong. The logic for not doing so is plain and simple. An imposed solution will be rejected by the people concerned and there will be turmoil. China needs a sustained period of peace for its progress. So why break peace? China's leadership has therefore been innovative enough to invent "the one country two systems" option. We have in the past tried to impose solutions on the Chittagong Hill Tracts which the tribals have categorically rejected. We seem to suffer from an inextinguishable complex and uncertainty about our ethnic minorities. During the past years we have seen protests against imposed solutions and rebelled against those. Yet we in our turn have tried to impose solutions on our ethnic minorities. We have not practiced in their case what we have always preached for ourselves.

In spite of ideological differences Deng Xiaoping respected the patriotism of even those who may believe in "capitalism, feudalism and even slavery". Here in Chittagong Hill Tracts our wrong policies not only failed to appreciate people's love for their land but also drove thousands of them away to seek refuge in India. No one, and that is the bottom line, leaves his home and hearth if he can help it. The tribals have done it not in search of gold but to literally save their lives. One has seen them die and die in those joyless refugee camps along the border. We do not seem to appreciate what is good for us. We fail to see that peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts will open up the immense development potential of the region and will thus help Bangladesh's progress.

In the past, we have displayed an utter callousness and lack of imagination in dealing with this problem. Labouring under grossly ill-conceived notions of "sovereignty and territorial integrity" we opted for a military solution, and that has predictably dragged us into a quagmire of failures.

The present government has taken some fresh initiatives in settling this unfortunate and long standing issue. The solution for the problem calls for statesmanship and not political juggling. One very much hopes that Sheikh Hasina and her government will display foresight, courage and above all a sense of justice in seeking a permanent solution of the problem within the framework of one Bangladesh, keeping in mind the fact that there can be diversity in unity as in case of "one country, two systems."

Judgment before Trial

The Prime Minister recently told the press that she had been "magnanimous" in not pursuing corruption cases against her opponents. She cannot afford to be magnanimous after initiating charges. Her government has to prove in a court of law either she is right or the writings on the city walls about "false cases" reflect the truth.

IT was an interesting piece of news on the back page of The Daily Star dated September 11. A case had been filed with the Assistant Sessions Judge of Dhaka "seeking a mandatory injunction to restrain the Leader of the Opposition from celebrating her birthday on August 15, saying it had hurt his feelings and impeded his (complainant's) right to observe the National Mourning Day on the same day." There had been enough controversy about Begum Zia's exact date of birth. Series of writings appeared in the national press. There is no more scope to re-open the issue or discuss the contents of the Pandora's Box containing the birthday mystery opened by some of Begum Zia's followers. Whether this can be a case for litigation, only jurists can say. The judge will also ultimately give his verdict either accepting or rejecting the prayer.

What really interested me was not the case itself but the last sentence of the report that reads, "The lawyers for the defendant raised slogans denouncing the filing of the case." I had no chance to meet these lawyers who are also known as "the officers of the court." Had I had that opportunity, I would have asked them why wouldn't one go to the court on this issue, for that matter any aggrieved or redress of any grievance? Not being present during the demonstration by the lawyers, nor the details being reported in the press, I cannot quote the slogans raised by the lawyers while expressing their "resentment." But from the examples of the past I can assume that they had said, "Withdraw the false case," or "No harassment by filing a false case." If my assumption is wrong, I apologise for alleged "misquote." But the demonstration itself is interference into the process of law. It is still more serious when lawyers participate in such a demonstration. The learned lawyers themselves know better whether this act of theirs was a display of disrespect for people's right to justice, or even prejudicial or contempt of court.

Since the whole episode relates to the lawyers who are supposed to help in dispensation of justice, it has a different magnitude. But in reality or real situation the attitude displayed by a section of lawyers, quite conversant with law, is reflection of our attitude towards rule of law. If this is the attitude in the legal profession, what is expected from the common people or laymen? Whenever there is a case filed against anyone even remotely connected with a political party, the slogan is raised, "Withdraw the false case." The man might have been charged with offences not related to politics ranging from common theft to murder. It is a common slogan painted in the walls in the city or echoed in the speeches of the political leaders that any litigation against them is politically motivated. None is ready to challenge the accusation made against him or her in a court of law. Is it because of lack of confidence in our courts and the law-enforcing authorities or, is the accused afraid of facing the truth? None denies the fact that certain cases are deemed to have been filed with the ulterior motive of harassment of the political opponents. The question is, whether these are exceptions or a political bias that is rampant with the legal system. The latter has been raised since Pakistani days. At that time personalities like Maulana Bhashani, Shahid Suhrawardy, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been hunted and

haunted like an ordinary criminal. Since then it has been difficult to distinguish between political harassment and criminal investigation against a corrupt politician. On the other hand, some persons have taken shelter under the umbrella of politics after committing heinous criminal offences.

We have also instances when political personalities were blackmailed into changing stances, especially whenever an autocrat had wrested power. In the process one's criminal past was forgotten and forlorn. Then there were made-up accusations of corruption, misuse of power, misappropriations and what-not. The amusing episode is, seldom these cases are pursued, especially after political understanding had been reached between the persons in-power and the men out-of-power. Thus there are examples of politicians sent to prison on corruption charges coming out gloriously and becoming a Minister of his erstwhile prosecutor. This happened during Ershad regime. Khaleda Zia had been criticised for accommodating the Thief of Baghdad in her party. The irony of fate is Ershad, who jailed some Ministers of his predecessor himself later faced corruption charges. The episode was repeated by successive governments. Except for the criminal cases against Ershad, charges against others were never followed up in the courts. Same is the situation now, with stories of series of corrupt activities of former BNP Ministers and even a few relatives of Begum Zia. All these cases, according to the allegedly persecuted person, are politically motivated. The victims will appear to be telling the truth, if the allegations are not pursued. Slogans like "Withdraw the false cases" will continue to appear on the city walls, the lawyers will indulge in demanding "Withdraw the cases before trial," unless truth prevails through trials and judgments.

Those who feel they are being politically persecuted should, however, have the moral courage to face the criminal charges in the court of law, clear the names, at least for the sake of removing the stigma. The verdict should not come from the writings on the wall, demonstration by the partisan lawyers or the procession on the street or the gathering before the Press Club, but from the court of law. As for those lawyers who were demonstrating in court compound outside, they should put on their gowns and argue their cases inside before the trial judge, of course if they have belief in the rule of law and faith in the judicial system in which they also have a role to play. I presume that they have that faith and belief after all the system provides them with bread and butter.

All these are all the more necessary for transparency in politics. As for the government, it should stop making wild accusations against opponents if the charges against them cannot be pursued, proved or established in the court. The Prime Minister recently told the press on her return from abroad that she had been "magnanimous" in not pursuing corruption cases against her opponents. She cannot afford to be magnanimous after defiling a political opponent by initiating charges. Her government has to prove in a court of law either she is right or the writings on the city walls about "false cases" reflect the truth. As for the opposition politicians they should throw challenge, not make demand against the law taking its own course.

Peace Prospects Stir Fears

Amid Security of War

A new ceasefire by republican guerrillas has opened the door to all-party peace talks in troubled Northern Ireland. History is in the making. But, as *Gemini News Service* reports, the unionist side is agonising over whether to risk a loss of its power. **Macdara Doyle** writes from Dublin

MID-SEPTEMBER has the potential to be one of the most momentous occasions in Irish history since the partitioning of the island three-quarters of a century ago. On 15 September, according to plans drawn up jointly by the British and Irish governments, all parties to the conflict in Northern Ireland will begin the task of negotiating a political solution.

The British and Irish governments will be represented at the table. All going well, Northern Ireland's nationalists (who wish to see Ireland reunited) and unionists (who favour the ties with Britain) will also participate. It will be the first time since 1920 that all parties have faced each other across the negotiating table.

To add further impetus to these historically charged talks, the negotiators face a deadline. The talks have a cut-off point of May 1998. The time frame was imposed to prevent any party from sabotaging the talks by refusing to stop talking.

The participants will not only be seeking a solution to the current troubles, which date back almost three decades. They will also have to address the causes of conflict, in order to ensure that violence does not erupt again. Thus the issue of Ireland's partition, plus the competing British and Irish claims to Northern Ireland, will have to be resolved.

In late July, the Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, declared that Articles Two and Three of the Irish constitution would be "on the negotiating table." The articles contain the Irish claim to the North.

Shortly after Ahern's statement, a proposed draft of what might replace Articles Two and Three — in the event of an agreement — was leaked to the media. Broadly speaking, the revised version would replace the territorial claim to the six counties with an "aspiration" for the reunification of the island, but only with the consent of the majority (unionist) community in Northern Ireland.

Ahern was criticised by some nationalists for acting "unilaterally". They felt he was ceding the Irish claim to the territory, without being assured that the British would also be negotiating on their own claim, which is set out in 1920 legislation partitioning Ireland.

However, it is virtually certain that Ahern's "revelation" — made on national radio — and the subsequent leaking of the revised articles were directed solely at the unionists. It is no exaggeration to say that their political representatives are less than enamoured with the talks process, which has moved to a new stage following the 19 July ceasefire called by guerrillas of the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Already two minor unionist parties, the UK Unionists and the Democratic Unionists, have walked out of preliminary meetings, and have declined invitation to the 15 September talks. However, given these parties' relative size, both governments could afford to let them walk.

They cannot, however, afford to have the major unionist group, the Official Ulster Unionist Party (OUP), follow suit. To do so would mean "all-party talks" degenerating into "some-party talks". If party leader David Trimble failed to turn up, the talks would collapse.

However, as one senior diplomat has commented: "There is nowhere else to go". His remark was echoed in August by Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary, Mo Mowlam, who called the talks "the only show in town."

Members of Northern Ireland's business community have also been urging the OUP's attendance, as have Protestant church leaders. Pressure of this sort may be enough to impel the major unionist party to the table. And then the fun begins.

Sinn Féin, the IRA's political allies, know full well that the current negotiations will not yield their desired goal: a united Ireland. It was no surprise, therefore, when the Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams,

spoke recently of "renegotiating the union" with Britain.

Although his remarks were seized upon by nationalist opponents of the talks — who see only a refashioned union and not a unified Ireland emerging — his party has been saying as much for two years now. Another senior Sinn Féin figure, Mitchell McLaughlin, has talked of creating a "new dispensation" — a political arrangement to which all in Northern Ireland can give allegiance.

Significantly, however, party officials have also referred consistently to whatever emerges from the talks process as a "staging post" on the road to a united Ireland.

This sets unionist nerves on edge.

In a perverse sense, the 27-year conflict secured the union with Britain. The Irish border was sealed and dotted with British soldiers. Peace, the unionists fear, could start to unravel things.

As keepers of a statelet created in their image, they hold considerable power. A negotiated solution, no matter how fudged, will mean a diminution of that power and a corresponding increase in nationalist influence. And giving Dublin a say in the region — many believe the talks could produce cross-border institutions — weakens the border.

No unionist leader wants to go down in history as the one who killed the union. This explains the hasty departure of the two minor unionist parties — and David Trimble's agonising. He will probably lead his party into the 15 September talks, but once inside, there is no guarantee they will engage in substantive negotiations.

If the talks then collapse, London and Dublin have said, by way of a threat, that they will draw up joint settlement proposals and put them to both electorates in Ireland in referendum. One way or another, 15 September promises to be a significant date in Irish history.

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