

BRITISH POLICY OPTIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND: “ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO THE CEMETERY?”

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On March 5, 1976 Mr. Merlyn Rees, the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, dissolved Ulster's Constitutional Convention after ten months of negligible progress. Plans for the convention had been announced by the British Government in July 1974 in the wake of a Protestant general strike that shut down the province and signalled the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement between Britain and the Irish Republic which was to have been the blueprint for the resolution of Ulster's problems. The purpose of the proposed convention was to provide an opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland themselves to devise a settlement to the raging conflict. At the convention, however, neither the Protestant nor the Catholic representatives were willing to compromise. The majority report, based on the Protestants' refusal to share any governmental power with the Catholics, was deemed unacceptable by the British Government, and the convention was dissolved. It was obvious that a new British policy was required.

The inability of Ulster's convention to devise a workable structure for the resolution of the problems of the province represents one more in a long line of failures of British policy toward Northern Ireland.¹ Despite its lack of success, however, Britain remains, in many ways, the central and essential actor in the Ulster conflict. At the same time, it is increasingly reluctant to become further involved in the dispute. Thus, London's decisions in the coming months will be a crucial determinant of Northern Ireland's future.

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1. There have been several recent contributions to the historical background relating to the failure of British policy in Northern Ireland. Among them are Robert Kee, *The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972); Lawrence J. McCaffery, *The Irish Question: 1900-1922* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968) and D.G. Bayce, *Englishmen and Irish Troubles, 1918-1922* (Cambridge University Press, 1972). Works focussing on recent Ulster events include Richard Rose, *Governing Without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); The Sunday Times Insight Team, *Northern Ireland: A Report on the Conflict* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Simon Winchester, *Northern Ireland in Crisis: Reporting the Ulster Troubles* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1975); and, most recently, George Dangerfield, *The Damnable Question* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976).

Among the criticisms leveled at Britain's recent policy in Northern Ireland has been the charge that it is essentially uninterested in the future of the province.² British preoccupation with the peacekeeping function of British troops rather than with efforts to secure a final resolution of the problem has tended to support the allegation. It is true that neither British political party has been wholly unambiguous about the value it attaches to Ulster's allegiance. Although both the Labour and Conservative Parties have supported Northern Ireland's constitutional link with Great Britain, as long as the majority of the people in the province want it, neither party has thrown its full moral support behind it; rather, the approach has often been one of indifference or of ignoring Ulster's basic problems altogether.

Nevertheless, British policy remains the key to the future of Northern Ireland, and it is from Britain that the other major actors in the drama will take their cue. Protestants and Catholics in Ulster will not be able to take any action that would radically alter the *status quo* until Britain's future policy is clarified.

The significance of Britain in the Ulster equation and the type of reaction that even rumors about a change in British policy are likely to elicit were dramatically illustrated in May of 1975, shortly after the constitutional convention for Northern Ireland was formally convened. The Reverend William Arlow, a respected Protestant clergyman, claimed that he had proof of a British pledge to the IRA that troops would be withdrawn from Ulster in the event of a breakdown of the convention.³ Although similar claims had occasionally been heard in the past, never had they come from such an impartial source, nor had they been voiced by someone with inside information of the secret negotiations between the IRA and the British Government. Rev. Arlow had participated in the meeting in late 1974 that eventually led to the IRA's December ceasefire, and his reputation for honesty and integrity was highly regarded in both religious communities.

Protestant reaction to the disclosure was immediate and severe. William Craig, leader of the Ulster Vanguard — a major element of the Protestants' successful coalition in elections for the convention—accused the British of trying to blackmail the Protestants into sharing power with the Catholics. He warned, "If this sort of thing continues, the only alternative will be a provisional Unionist Government to

2. For an interesting presentation of the argument that, since the time of the Tudor conquest of Ireland in the sixteenth century, British policy has been the major cause of the "Irish Question," see Patrick O'Farrell, *Ireland's English Question* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

3. *The Times* (London), May 26, 1975.

negotiate a new constitution from a position of strength.”⁴ A similar sentiment was expressed by the Rev. Ian Paisley, a long-time spokesman for the Protestant militants: “If the British Government repudiates the expressed wish of the Ulster majority and withdraws, then the Ulster majority will have no other option but to establish and defend their own government.”⁵

It was striking that while Protestant extremists reacted with sharp statements, and even Ulster’s moderates called for an explanation more satisfactory than the terse one-sentence denial offered by the British Government’s Northern Ireland office, the Provisional Sinn Fein — the political wing of the IRA — remained relatively silent. A Sinn Fein spokesman refused to comment, saying only that his movement had always maintained that the British Government had negotiated a two-way truce and not a one-way ceasefire.⁶

Later, a second statement issued by Mr. Rees flatly denied a “sell-out” and served to reassure the loyalists. But the entire episode demonstrated how important Britain’s policies are for the evolution of events in Ulster.

The major policy options open to the British — each of which will be considered in turn — are: unilateral withdrawal, negotiated independence, repartition, total integration of the province into the United Kingdom, or maintenance of the *status quo*. It should be noted at the outset that each of these involves serious drawbacks.

Unilateral Withdrawal

A unilateral British withdrawal from Northern Ireland runs the strong risk of catalyzing a civil war. According to one observer close to the situation:

The deep rooted obsessional fear that the Loyalist leaders like Mr. Paisley have, that the British are about to sell Ulster down a Republican river, probably forms the most potent factor in Ulster politics today.⁷

At the same time, however, the Catholics fear that a British pullout will leave the province in the hands of a “loyalist” regime that will discard even those fragile civil rights and freedoms which the minority has worked so long to secure. Statements like Mr. Craig’s and Mr. Paisley’s do nothing to dispel the Catholics’ anxiety. An imminent British withdrawal would galvanize the fears of both sides, and the stage would be set for the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland on an unprecedented scale.

If the British were to withdraw unilaterally from Northern Ireland, a

4. *The Times* (London), May 27, 1975.

5. *The Times* (London), May 26, 1975.

6. *The Times* (London), May 27, 1975.

7. Quoted in *The Guardian* (Weekly), May 31, 1975.

Protestant move to seize power would probably follow, spearheaded by their paramilitary groups, which are reported to have as many as 50,000 to 60,000 armed members.⁸ If a British withdrawal from Ulster were imminent, the loyalists might even attempt a "coup" and a unilateral declaration of independence similar to that of Rhodesia. Such a move would guarantee attacks by militant Protestants and Catholics on one another's enclaves.

A civil war in Northern Ireland, however, would hardly be a clear-cut affair. There are already political divisions within the para-military organizations of both communities, and these differences of opinion, especially with regard to the conflict's ultimate goals, could well erupt. In the past, feuds within both the Protestant and Catholic communities have set Protestant against Protestant and Catholic against Catholic. During the 1975 ceasefire, for example, a feud broke out between the Official wing of the IRA, on the one hand, and the Catholic Irish Republic Socialist Party (IRSP) on the other.⁹ Similarly, in the Protestant community, the pro-Marxist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) came to blows with the right-wing Ulster Defense Association (UDA). In each case, left wing parties (the official IRA and the UVF) were confronted with challenges within their own communities that had nothing to do with religion. Rather, the disputes had strong ideological over-tones. The IRSP broke away from the Official IRA claiming that the latter group was "reformist" and no longer committed to Marxist-Leninist ideology. The UVF-UDA feud was also based, to a large degree, on left-right ideological differences.

Other factors, however, also triggered the feuds. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that ideological accusations leveled against the IRA by the IRSP may have been initiated by elements within the IRA who were tired of the truces and desired a return to violence.¹⁰ The feud in the Protestant camp may have had as a root cause a long-standing argument between the UVF and the UDA over which organization should take the profits earned by local loyalist clubs.¹¹

Whatever the cause for infighting within the Catholic and Protestant communities, the feuds were bloody. IRA "Officials" blamed the IRSP for the murder of several of their leaders. The IRSP leveled similar charges against the IRA. The feud between the UVF and UDA led to numerous shootings, bombings, and two deaths.

8. *The New York Times*, February 2, 1975.

9. In December 1969, the IRA divided into two factions. The minority that broke away, known as the "Provisional" wing, disagreed with the Marxist line of the "Officials" and returned to the republicanism and violence that had earlier characterized the IRA. See J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA, 1916-1974* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1974).

10. *The Times* (London), March 8, 1975.

11. *The Times* (London), March 17, 1975.

Bloodshed in the Catholic camp was brought to an uneasy resolution only after the IRSP announced that it was ceasing its activity in Belfast in order to isolate the persons responsible for the shootings. The Protestant feud continues to be carried on in a more latent and "civilized" manner.

In the event of a civil war in Ulster after a unilateral British withdrawal, the struggle against a common "enemy" of a different religion would probably serve to unify the various factions in the Protestant and Catholic communities for a time. However, it is unlikely that such unity could be sustained indefinitely. The resultant situation has been strikingly described by one analyst of the Ulster problem:

The country as a whole might conceivably face a period, perhaps a long period, in which it would become a battleground for contending factions, allying with and opposing each other in a kaleidoscope out of which might emerge a 'strong' government, of the right or of the left, ruling by virtue of its ability to impose and enforce peace, and counting parliamentary democracy among its first victims.¹²

Another likely prospect, were the British to depart Northern Ireland and civil war to ensue, is that of outside intervention by interested parties seeking to exploit the chaos. External involvement in internal conflicts of small states is not an unfamiliar phenomenon, and there is no reason to believe that Northern Ireland would be immune from such external pressures.

Since the Catholic minority would be the immediate victims of a Protestant seizure of power and civil war in Ulster, it is not improbable that the Irish Republic would be drawn into the conflict. In such a case the island would be embroiled in a quarrel as basic as the conflict over the status of Ireland fifty years ago. The most likely form of Irish involvement, however, would be a joint intervention with Britain for the purpose of saving lives and restoring order. The final outcome of this intervention could well be the repartition of the island, with Catholic areas in the north annexed to the Irish Republic and a small Protestant corner of the island — virtually without Catholics — still linked to Great Britain.

Other external parties might also become involved in an Ulster civil war. The Marxist and/or Socialist ideologies professed by groups in both Ulster communities are widely recognized, and requests for outside aid might not go unheeded. Provisional IRA connections with other "revolutionary" groups and governments, for example, have already been documented.¹³ These "revolutionaries" could easily

12. F.S.L. Lyons, "The Alternatives Open to Governments," in *The Ulster Debate*, by J.C. Beckett, et. al. (London: The Bodley Head in connection with the Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1972), p. 28.

13. For an interesting examination of Libya's connections with the IRA, for example, see *The*

provide arms and money in support of the IRA or any other Ulster faction during a civil war.

An outbreak of civil war in Northern Ireland has long been anathema to the British. It is therefore doubtful that they would pursue any policy that would directly lead to this result. But there are other factors that militate against unilateral British withdrawal from Ulster as a viable policy.

British withdrawal would have a strong impact on Britain's role in the European Community.¹⁴ A sharp difference between the Republic of Ireland and Britain and the negative response to unilateral British withdrawal by other EC members would be certain to affect adversely any British initiative toward taking the lead in Community affairs.

Furthermore, negative reaction of EC members would be only a part of the international opprobrium directed at Britain. Scorned for not being able to maintain order in what is, constitutionally, a part of the United Kingdom, the British would be strongly criticized by the international community for taking a precipitate action the consequences of which could not have been unknown to them. Britain's international prestige would suffer a severe blow.

Negotiated Independence

While the implications of a unilateral British withdrawal from Northern Ireland tend to eliminate this as a reasonable course of action, British disengagement from Northern Ireland need not take the form of a precipitate withdrawal. One possible course is the removal of the British presence from the province as part of a negotiated independence.

The concept of Northern Ireland's independence seems to have originated with younger Protestant loyalist leaders — men like John Taylor and Glenn Barr — who have had greater contact with the Catholics than many of the older leaders. It is based on one crucial, and controversial, assumption. According to those who favor this option, the basic conflict in Ulster is one of identification; the question about which the Ulster communities are fighting is "Who am I?" Ulster's Protestants perceive themselves as an extension of Britain; the Catholics look upon themselves as the vanguard of a united Ireland. Protestant loyalists, the argument continues, really have no more in common with the British than their Catholic nationalist counterparts have with the Irish Republic. According to John Taylor,

There's been a great erosion in outside loyalties. The loyalists fly the Ulster flags, not Union Jacks. The Catholics look at themselves more and more as an Ulster, not a Dublin community.¹⁵

Times (London), April 21 and 23, 1975.

14. See Garret Fitzgerald, "Ireland in the Context of the European Economic Community," in *The Ulster Debate*, op. cit., pp. 68-83.

15. *The New York Times*, February 26, 1975.

Thus the goal of an independent Ulster achieved through negotiations would be a secular state to which both communities could give their loyalty. It is argued that in this context the Protestant majority, no longer doubtful of the Catholics' commitment, would be willing to make concessions to the minority which they have thus far been reluctant to extend.

There is concern in Ulster, however, whether a Northern Ireland independent of either the United Kingdom or the Irish Republic is a viable proposition. The implications of independence of Northern Ireland were reviewed on both sides in the months following the declaration of the 1974 Christmas ceasefire. Green Papers were produced to demonstrate the extent to which the province is economically dependent on the rest of the United Kingdom for its financial prosperity. In what were described in the media as "unprecedented" broadcasts, local Ulster television aired discussions among Northern Irish economists regarding the economic implications of Ulster's independence.¹⁶ One Belfast economist maintained, for example, that independence in Ulster would mean a fall of one-fifth in unemployment, sickness, invalidity, and supplementary benefits, as well as considerable reductions in family allowances¹⁷

One could expect that in any negotiated settlement Britain, and perhaps even Dublin, would retain some right of intervention. An independent Ulster would obviously be constrained economically by both London's and Dublin's effective veto on its trading relationship with the European Community. In addition, an independent Ulster would be constrained by the very fragility of the settlement — both communities would be under immense pressure to be accommodating, tolerant, and discreet in order to keep a tenuous situation from severely deteriorating.

The major barrier to the "independence" alternative is, of course, fear. On one hand the Catholics fear that the Protestant paramilitary groups would use the opportunity to subject the minority to persecution and humiliation. As one Catholic leader has said:

When Glenn Barr and John Taylor talk of independent Ulster they really do think of power sharing and human rights. When some of the others talk about it they think in terms of ruling the Catholics.¹⁸

On the other hand, there is a strong fear in Protestant quarters that with independence, elements on both sides of the border would begin a drive to incorporate Ulster into a united Ireland. The stance adopted

16. *The Times* (London), March 7, 1975.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *The New York Times*, February 16, 1975.

by the Dublin Government toward an independent Ulster is thus a crucial variable prior to the initiation of negotiations. If Dublin were to make it clear that the sovereignty of an independent Northern Ireland would be respected, the fears of the Protestants might be somewhat allayed. Nevertheless, the prospect of an independent Northern Ireland is visionary at this time. With increasing pressure in Britain to disengage from Ulster, however, the option of a negotiated independence could well become the focus of increasing attention and serious consideration.

Repartition

While independence for Northern Ireland may be kept in mind, it is not at all certain that the British will want to sever totally the connection between herself and province. If, indeed, the British are intent on retaining some form of constitutional link with Northern Ireland, that connection could take many forms. Repartition has already been mentioned in the context of a joint Anglo-Irish intervention during a civil war. The British Government, however, could also initiate negotiations with a mind to redrawing the present boundaries. Superficially, such a course of action has a number of attractions. In particular, repartition could effectively deal with the problems posed by the border areas — such as South Armagh — many of which are recognized republican strongholds.

A major barrier to an effective repartition of Northern Ireland, however, is the population distribution in the city of Belfast. Almost half of Ulster's Catholics currently live in the western portion of Belfast, yet any Protestant enclave in Ireland would insist on having this city at its center. Thus, use of repartition as a means of settling the current dispute would require population relocation on a massive scale, and most likely elicit strong resistance.

Moreover, there is no assurance that repartition would prove acceptable to the IRA. It might, in fact, encourage militant IRA members to intensify their efforts to eliminate the British and Protestant presence from the island. Therefore, unless the British Government had prior agreement on the general outlines or principles of a repartition plan from all of the concerned parties, formal negotiations aimed at redrawing Ulster's boundaries would be a precarious option to pursue.

Total Integration

As controversial as repartition (and perhaps even more dangerous) is the suggestion for the total integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom. According to Mr. Enoch Powell — a former right-wing member of the Conservative Party and currently a representative of Ulster Unionists in the British Parliament:

What we ask for may be summed up in a single sentence: to be treated as we are, no more, no less, but exactly like any other integral part of the United Kingdom, with the same rights, the same constitution, the same laws and the same privileges.¹⁹

Total integration of Ulster would have two major effects: first, it would increase Northern Ireland's parliamentary representation at Westminster; second, it would reassure the Protestants about Britain's continued link to the province. Such a course of action, however, would involve the British Government more deeply in the Ulster conflict at a time when its intent, and the intent of the British public, appears to be moving in the opposite direction. It should also be noted that the implications of integration would not be overlooked by the IRA. A renewal of terrorism would be almost certain.

The events preceding the 1974 Christmas truce provide evidence that any future IRA terror would be largely directed at soft targets in England. IRA bombing strategy in the latter half of 1974 was clearly aimed at civilian targets which would attract publicity and wreak havoc among the British population. One such target was the Tower of London, where an IRA bomb set off in July killed one person and injured forty-two tourists.²⁰ In November, the IRA bombed two pubs in the center of Birmingham wounding approximately one hundred people and killing fourteen.²¹

The bombing of civilian targets in Britain proved worthwhile to the IRA. In the words of one IRA member, "Last year taught us that in publicity terms one bomb in Oxford Street is worth ten in Belfast. It is not a lesson we are liable to forget in a hurry."²² Thus Britain could not pursue a policy of integration for Northern Ireland without risking the consequences of full-scale IRA bombing attacks on British citizens.

Maintaining the Status Quo

In light of the foregoing discussion it would appear that the only viable short-term option open to the British Government is the continuation of the *status quo*. It is not an attractive alternative. Open-ended, inflammatory, and sure to exacerbate the enmity with which both communities in Ulster look upon the British troops, Britain's commitment to keep Northern Ireland's peace is, at best, "government by remote control."²³ It is a stop-gap measure, totally unsuited to solving the fundamental problems of the province, responding to the symptoms of Ulster's illness and not to its causes.

19. The Times (London), May 7, 1975.

20. The New York Times, July 18, 1874.

21. The New York Times, November 12, 1974.

22. The Times (London), May 7, 1975.

23. The Guardian (Weekly), May 31, 1975.

Pursuant to a *status quo* policy, Britain's immediate aim must be the restoration of order until Ulster's permanent police force can reassume its duties in the province. British Army units cannot be expected to carry out policing functions permanently. The British recognize this fact and have attempted, somewhat successfully, to strengthen the position of Ulster's police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).

In the six months preceding the 1974 Christmas ceasefire, the RUC had been totally ineffective in preventing violence in the province. Its major problem was that it did not have the respect of the people. As the *Economist* noted in an editorial on the situation in Ulster, "Even children regarded the police as enemies."²⁴ This strong feeling of disdain for the RUC was common to both the Catholic and Protestant communities. As the *Times* of London explained:

The Unionists were demanding a third force home guard, a better armed police force and calling for what amounted to raids on Roman Catholic housing estates. The main Catholic social democratic and labour party were refusing to talk about the Royal Ulster Constabulary until it had been reformed. The Provisional's only reaction was to shoot them.²⁵

The autonomy of the RUC will, of course, be restricted until a government acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants is found. Nevertheless, the position of Ulster's police force has improved considerably since the ceasefire. Crime prevention exercises held in Catholic neighborhoods during the ceasefire were favorably received by residents and, more importantly, the IRA has recognized the need for Catholic neighborhoods to be policed on a regular and organized basis. On the Protestant side, Unionist threats to form their own paramilitary police force seem to have fallen by the wayside. For the future, tact and evenhandedness on the part of the Ulster police force will be essential if positive developments are to be encouraged. These qualities will be particularly important when the RUC is called upon to maintain order without the assistance of the British Army.

Perhaps the major problem facing Britain in trying to sustain the *status quo* and achieve a negotiated settlement of the Ulster problem is the prospect of continued terrorism directed towards British citizens. By initiating its bombing campaign in England in late 1974, the IRA hoped to fuel the desire among the English populace to withdraw from Northern Ireland altogether and let the province fend for itself. Bombings in fashionable London restaurants and shopping areas in the autumn of 1975 amply demonstrated the willingness of militant republicans to apply this sort of pressure, and, if developments in

24. *The Economist*, April 5, 1975, p. 17.

25. *The Times* (London), March 7, 1975.

Ulster proceed in a fashion unsatisfactory to the IRA, it is very likely that the tactic will be resumed. The problem is compounded by the apparent loss of control by the formal leadership of both the Catholic and Protestant paramilitary organizations over some of their more radical members. For these militants, a continuation of the *status quo* is totally unacceptable. Therefore, lack of movement away from the existing stalemate would be sufficient to incite them to renewed terrorism both in Ulster and in England.

The continuation of terrorist attacks in London and elsewhere in Britain could have a profound impact on British attitudes toward government policies in Northern Ireland. To date, the terrorist attacks have given Englishmen a brief taste of what life in Ulster is actually like. While most Britons still believe that civil war in Ulster can be prevented only by stationing troops in Northern Ireland, a stepped up terrorist campaign in Great Britain — one that would result in numerous deaths, disrupt daily activities, and spread fear throughout all strata of British society — would dramatically increase public pressure on the government to withdraw British troops from Northern Ireland altogether.

Conclusions

Conor Cruise O'Brien, a spokesman for the Irish government on Ulster affairs, once likened the consideration of options for bringing an end to strife in Northern Ireland to a search for "alternative routes to the cemetery."²⁶ In many respects, Mr. O'Brien's observations have been confirmed by the foregoing analysis of "answers" to Ulster's problems. Nevertheless, this study has shown that a convergence of private and public views on the eventual necessity of withdrawing British troops from Northern Ireland is beginning to emerge within Ulster and Britain.

The Catholic community, of course, has been opposed to British rule from the start. The Protestant community, while professing loyalty to the Crown, would now like to be free from British interference in the day-to-day life of Ulster. Across the Irish Sea, the British public is making it increasingly clear that it feels that it should not be forced to accept the physical, psychological, and emotional burden that has been placed on it by years of sectarian strife in Northern Ireland. Britain cannot assume responsibility for Ulster's future indefinitely, and the day is quickly approaching when Britain will no longer be able to delay withdrawing its troops. For the sake of all parties concerned, some consensus on the future government of Northern Ireland must be reached before this day arrives.

Most assuredly, a great deal of the responsibility for a peaceful

²⁶ The Observer, February 6, 1972.

solution to the problem in Northern Ireland rests in London. If the history of Northern Ireland has taught Britain anything, it is that neither Protestants nor Catholics can be coerced into accepting each other's views. Britain must lay to rest once and for all Protestant fears that they will be forced to accept unification. The British could, however, quietly support policies in Dublin that would make it easier for Protestants to draw slowly closer to the Irish Republic. At the same time, Britain must move to guarantee the civil rights of the Catholic minority in Ulster.

It must be emphasized in closing, however, that the responsibility for finding a solution to problems in Ulster is not Britain's alone. The Irish Republic, which shares a common border with Ulster and represents a "Mecca" to many Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland, must also take a more active role in easing the crisis in Ulster. Furthermore, Catholics and Protestants in the Province must come to terms with their differences, for no civilized society can tolerate prolonged sectarian strife. A failure of these parties to cooperate will result in an open-ended conflict of an even more violent and destructive nature than that which currently plagues the Province.