

British commentators were, for the most part, pained by the results of the Northern Ireland Assembly elections: moderation had not triumphed the sectarian divide had not been crossed. What this means is that the Alliance Party was a flop. Alliance is moderate and non-sectarian in the special British sense that it is a movement to persuade Catholics to vote unionist. Instead they voted massively for the SDLP, thus showing support for a truly non-sectarian cause. The British have difficulty in seeing this because of their nationalist myth according to which heaven has given them the thankless task of keeping peace between the warring Irish tribes. The reality is quite otherwise.

The fundamental political issue in Northern Ireland is, and always has been, civil rights: the question whether and how half a million people are to be brought for the first time to enjoy equality with their fellow-citizens in the matter of jobs, housing and political power. This issue has been hidden fairly successfully behind the smoke of Provisional explosions and the rather denser smokescreen of Unionist talk about the Constitution, but it is this that determines the Catholic vote. (A counter-argument might be that the group which has most consistently concentrated on civil rights, the Official Republicans, was a total failure, but this was partly because Provisional violence had given all Republicans a bad name and perhaps rather more because the special blend of Catholicism and Marxism that sustains the Officials is a little strong for Northern Irish stomachs, especially clerical ones.)

For Catholics, sectarianism does not mean hating Prods, it means not having a job because you went to St Theresa's school; they want it abolished and at the moment they see the SDLP as the party most likely to effect this. That they are right was quite clearly demonstrated after the local council elections: where, as in Derry, the SDLP came to power, they appointed Unionists to share the administration, in no case did the Unionists offer to share power with their opponents. To most Catholics the question of Irish unity is secondary and relative; they would stay with Britain if this would bring them first-class citizenship, otherwise they will try something else. Now just how much reason do they have for thinking that Britain will act seriously in this matter? (Brian Faulkner, of course, says that equality has already been achieved but it is doubtful whether even he believes this.) For half a century, after all, the British showed complete indifference to their fate—it is still possible to hear even English Catholics speaking of the 'agony of Northern Ireland' as of something that began in 1969. Again, during the last few years the military intervention of Britain has been at best inept and at worst

directed against the under-privileged Catholics. Whether we think of the Cusack and Beattie murders, the Falls curfew, Internment and the subsequent tortures, Bloody Sunday or Operation Motorman, the British guns and violence have normally been turned against the struggling poor and have in practice served to maintain a discriminatory and sectarian *status quo*. This is not exclusively true, things have been much more complicated, but the overall pattern is perfectly obvious. Undoubtedly, in the abstract, the British sincerely wish that there were no discrimination in Ireland, but such practical half-measures as they have taken to eliminate it have been hesitating and ineffective. In any case, direct rule, which was a test of British intentions in laboratory conditions, did not produce reassuring results. Whatever intentions the British may have thought that they had, the number of people arbitrarily imprisoned after secret trial or no trial at all is now double what it was a year ago, and the great majority of these are Catholics. Finally, the theory that modern British capital will inevitably want an end to primitive and quasi-feudal institutions because they are bad for business, has to face the fact that Northern Ireland is a very profitable field of investment with a productivity rate higher than England's. As a Dublin commentator put it to me: 'Meanwhile, beneath all the riots and repression, with all the vagaries of the political scene, the good old appropriation of surplus value goes steadily on'.

In view of all this, the northern Catholic can be forgiven for not putting all his faith in the British connection. In practice his enthusiasm for Irish unity fluctuates according to his estimate of British intentions. It was immediately after Bloody Sunday that John Hume exclaimed, 'Now it's a united Ireland or nothing!', but this should not be taken as an article of political faith. Most Catholics would rather have an end to open violence than a united Ireland, but they want an end to discrimination more than either of these.

The uncertainties about Britain on the Catholic side appear amongst the Protestants as an actual split. It would be nice to believe, as some British commentators apparently do, that the division is between those (Official Unionists) who no longer want to maintain the Protestant domination, and those (Vanguard, etc.) who still do. In fact, they both do; the split is between those who trust Britain to maintain their privileges and those who do not trust her. The gallant NILP which really did want to end sectarianism from the Protestant side sank without trace (unless you count wee Davie Bleakley as a trace).

What, then, is the SDLP to do? If Britain goes into one of her phases of good behaviour, if the troops are taken out of Derry where they are merely provoking the Provos to idiotic bombings, if they are restricted in other areas and ordered to stop the harassment of the Catholic ghettos and, above all, if internment (under any name)

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