

The misfortune of the Irish is not that they are orange or green but that they are white. If only they were black the British would perhaps understand what they were dealing with—the emergence of a colonial territory into independence. The northern Protestants are to be included in this; they are not to be compared to, say, the white settlers of Rhodesia. Like the *pieds noirs* of Algeria they have lived in the country for generations, but unlike them they do not take their culture, their religion or their mythology from the colonial power. They are far less English than was the old Protestant ascendancy in Dublin or indeed than most Dubliners today. The O'Neils and the Chichesters who went to English public schools and spend half their time in England, are English of course, but they are not the people of Cookstown or Ballymena. Belfast, whatever your religion, differs from Youghal about as much as Middlesbrough does from Budleigh Salterton, but it is one nation and it is not English.

Like so many emerging colonial nations, the Irish are beset by a tribal conflict. It was instigated in the interests of the colonial power itself and perpetuated for the sake of the class who were economically dominant at the time of the first stage of British withdrawal—the northern Protestant businessmen and landlords. Kevin Boyle has argued (in our January issue) that now, as the international firms move in, this group is losing its importance; the new capitalists have no special interest in preserving Protestant domination. If this is so, the sectarian conflict is no longer much use to anyone with a real prospect of political power (Mr Paisley, in spite of appearances, is not going to be a littler Hitler) and hence will be of decreasing importance on the Northern Irish scene. Of course there will be religious riots for some time to come, but at least the Unionists have recently stopped *encouraging* them—this is what they mean by 'the reforms'. This does not mean that discrimination in jobs and housing has finished—the situation in County Fermanagh would startle a hardened segregationist from Ozark, Alabama—but it does mean that the struggle against it is no longer hopeless.

The new capitalists have as little interest in partition as they have in Protestant domination; since the Anglo-Irish Free-Trade Agreement there is not much to choose between North and South as investment areas. In this matter Ian Paisley probably understood the new Unionists better than they did themselves: they were quite ready to preside over the dissolution of an irrelevant border as Ireland, North and South, moved with England into the new capitalist block of the Common Market.

Those of us who are socialists cannot look at any of this with much enthusiasm, but both the sectarian and the regional divisions in Ireland are as irrelevant to the working class as they are to I.C.I. or Aristotle Onassis. The class-struggle can hardly begin until they are out of the way. Any attempt by the left to make use of the 'Catholic'

side would be as disastrous as the right-wing use of the 'Protestants'.

In view of all this, what does the British army think it is doing in the North? In Derry in August 1969 it manifestly had a peace-keeping role; the soldiers arrived just in time to prevent a covertly sectarian confrontation between the Bogside and the R.U.C. turning into a straight sectarian fight between Catholics and B Specials; but soldiers are not designed to be policemen. Since then there have been changes; the disarmed R.U.C. look more like genuine policemen (and the conversion of the B Special companies into 'rifle clubs' has at least meant the withdrawal of official government recognition from this private army); the consequence is that the soldiers look more like genuine soldiers. The North increasingly resembles a territory under military occupation and any regular visitor to Belfast over the past year will have recognized one of the results of this—the growth of a kind of exasperated republicanism amongst people who were formerly simply socialists or liberals or nothing in particular. The sympathy for the nationalist, 'physical force' I.R.A. Provisionals is only a symptom of a more widespread tendency. It is useless to complain of the troops behaving provocatively; any troops stationed amongst a hostile population will behave provocatively. The question is whether they should be there at all. Are they not, in fact, simply making the next development more difficult? There will, in any case, be demonstrations leading to riots as Ireland adjusts itself to its new situation, but the build-up of military forces is probably going to make this unnecessarily bloody.

England, it seems, will only be saved from drifting into a mini-Vietnam because Dublin does not feel itself threatened by the British in the way that Hanoi feels threatened by the U.S., but even if we are not moving into the last of our colonial wars, the troops are, at best, perpetuating a system of violence and discontent. It is worth considering whether it might not be better just to go away. Perhaps the longer we stay the more our withdrawal will resemble the American withdrawal from South Vietnam, the more blood and bitterness we are going to leave behind us.

April seems the right month for fantastic suggestions, so let us suppose that Northern Ireland ceased to be merely a depressed area of the United Kingdom and became an independent country. One immediate result could be *de jure* recognition by the Republic. No nationalist or republican piety need prevent Dublin from recognizing and welcoming another sovereign Irish state. The idea that the Irish army would march across the border as soon as British 'protection' was removed is ludicrous; nobody at all in Ireland wants another civil war and no Dublin politician wants the Shankill on his hands. There could then be realistic negotiations to bring the two states closer together. Recognition by the South would calm the more hysterical Protestant fears while at the same time the physical possibility of intervention, however remote in practice, might make

the majority a little less arrogant in their dealings with the Catholics.

Those, and it must be said that they are a substantial majority including Catholics as well as Protestants, who on a referendum would certainly opt for the *status quo*,¹ would do so for two reasons. Some of them have largely illusory fears about 'Rome rule' and, much more importantly, all of them like the health service, the pensions and the comparatively high unemployment benefits—a consideration of some importance if you live in one of the areas where the unemployment rate is over 40 per cent. For these reasons most of the people of Northern Ireland are against breaking the union with England, just as most of the people in England are against going into the Common Market: in neither case need this close the question. As to the first point, any move that helps to close the gap between North and South is likely to erode the clerical power structure of the Roman Church in both areas—a development that can only be welcomed by all Irish Christians. As to the second, we must ask whether the Northern Irish are resigned to living on welfare as a depressed area of a larger and largely indifferent state, or whether, like Tanzania, for example, they are prepared to face the risks of building their own future—with the co-operation of their fellow Irish in the South. It seems ironic that the feckless Micks in the Republic can manage (admittedly extremely badly) without foreign subsidies while the sturdy Protestants of the North must demand English handouts. Considering the centuries during which Ireland has been systematically looted by the English, any Irishman of any religion is, of course, morally entitled to anything he can squeeze out of the British treasury and good luck to him, but the recovery of such ancestral debts may not be the surest way to independence or even prosperity. Fifty years of dependence on England have left Northern Ireland one of the poorest and unhappiest areas in Europe. It is perhaps time for a change.

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¹I refer to a referendum confined to residents in Northern Ireland. If a ballot were taken of 'all the Irish' (including the twenty-six counties) the result would be very different. Moreover, if a ballot were taken of 'all the British' (including England, Scotland and Wales) the result might be even more dramatically different—not many people in Britain see the point of spending a lot of money and risking the lives of their sons in trying to solve Stormont's problems.