

Comment

Those of our regular readers who find time to read 'Comment' will know that ever since we first began to discuss Northern Ireland four years ago we have advocated neither a 'united Ireland' nor a 'British' Northern Ireland but an independent Irish state in the six counties. We have suggested that such a state might be quite likely to draw nearer to its companion state in the south. We believe that the real reasons for partition (the conflicting requirements of developed northern and undeveloped southern capitalism) have disappeared, so that the Orange and Nationalist ideologies supported by, and partially concealing, these economic realities cannot last for long. But that is a matter for a future generation, there is no reason why we should concern ourselves with it. The immediate problem has a dual source: on the one hand there is the direct effect of the British military and political presence in Ireland with its half century of support for a sectarian Protestant regime; on the other hand there is the indirect effect of this presence, the growth of militant nationalist movements amongst the Catholics, with, as a consequence of both, the strangling at birth of any working-class unity across the 'religious' divide. (The Catholics and Protestants referred to are, of course, distinguished not so much by their theological positions as by their families—in this sense it is quite proper to speak of tribes rather than churches.)

The Protestant determination not to be governed by a Dublin unduly influenced by the Roman clergy is one that can be respected—especially as Dublin evinces even less inclination to govern Belfast than to be governed by Rome. How the situation will appear, however, when the Republic has become a secular state in practice as well as in theory is again something too remote to concern us.

Similarly the determination of the majority throughout Ireland that no part of the island should remain a British colony can also be respected—it cannot be too strongly emphasised that Irish Catholics, whether from north or south are not anti-Protestant (there is no Catholic equivalent of Paisley or the *Protestant Telegraph*) they are, in certain clear circumstances, anti-British. Add these two determinations together and the answer is an independent non-British north alongside the independent non-British south.

There is nothing in the Republican tradition to suggest that Ireland has to be a single state, still less that it has to be a Catholic state; one of the many distortions produced in Irish life by the presence of the British has been the confusion of Republicanism with Catholic Nationalism. Historically Ireland has hardly existed as a single state except under foreign pressure; there seems no reason why two states should not exist side by side, at least for the present, just as Spain and Portugal exist

together on the same land-mass. What is intolerable is the present situation which is more like the co-existence of Spain and Gibraltar—a British military colony intruding on the Iberian peninsula.

In politics, however, what is to be done is only part of the solution; at least as important is the question of *how* and *when* it is done. When we originally advocated (amidst choruses of goodnatured derision) an independent North four years ago, it was still possible to envisage such a state being set up by agreement, with concessions by everyone and relative good will on all sides. Given a British commitment to withdraw from Ireland, Dublin could have held a constitutional referendum confident that the people of the South would vote to leave Northern Ireland to the northern Irish and to relinquish any claim on it by the Republic. This would in itself have reduced tension in the north. Similarly a British commitment to withdraw would have meant that most of the Provisionals could have seen their task as accomplished and, provided that the new state respected the rights of Catholics, they could have ceased to function. Again, the new state, inevitably largely Protestant, could (given whole-hearted and practical recognition by Dublin) afford a more magnanimous attitude towards Catholics—no longer seen as a threat to the constitution—and moreover in the absence of British military support she could not afford so to misbehave as to re-activate the militant Catholic defence groups. The need to collaborate with Dublin over the economic development of those areas where the border is peculiarly senseless, like Dunalk/Newry and the Foyle valley, would also induce in the new northern government a more civilised attitude to its Catholic citizens. Without the unifying myth of anti-popey the Protestant monolith would begin to break down on more realistic class lines. It is considerations of this kind, rather than assurances from Glenn Barr (himself by no means an old-fashioned Protestant bigot) that might have given some hope for a viable, democratic north.

All this, of course, depends on the premiss that Britain is prepared to get out of Ireland, but the chaos of the last four years has been the direct result of British reluctance to do this. British policy has twisted and turned and offered every conceivable solution except the obvious one. The cover story that the northern Irish and particularly the northern Irish Protestants are not yet fit for self-government need not of course be taken seriously. In so far as it is sincere at all it is merely a characteristic manifestation of British racism; we have heard it before whenever the British have been forced out of a colony. There is no denying that a post-colonial state is difficult to govern; there are always opportunities for the ex-coloniser to say 'I told you so', but these problems have to be faced; the attempt to evade them by maintaining the colonial presence only leads, as we have seen, to increasing repression.

If we ask why it should be in the interests of the British ruling class to remain in occupation of Ireland the answers are complex: besides direct matters of economics and investment, besides a general disinclination to give up any power at all, there is probably a vestigial feeling dating from the days of sea-planes and battleships that a military base on the Atlantic is somehow useful to Britain, as well as a more realistic

recognition that Northern Ireland forms a valuable training ground for the military activity that may be necessary fairly soon in other depressed urban areas of the United Kingdom. What we seem to have seen in the last year is these considerations gradually losing ground in the face of the sheer cost of the enterprise, its unpopularity amongst the British people and its ineffectiveness in suppressing the Provisionals.

If this is so we can see the cease-fire or truce as marking the British commitment at last to withdraw, with the Convention and its inevitable failure providing the face-saving pretext for the move. Indeed we have had direct evidence of this from the Revd William Arlow. No attention need be paid to Merlyn Rees's 'denials' of all this; leaving aside the grotesque pretence that he was taken by surprise by Arlow's statement on Sunday (which he had not only been told of on Friday but which had also been broadcast in the United States some time before), the fact is that he did not deny what the statement said. He denied that there had been an 'agreement' with the Provos, he did not deny that there was a commitment to withdraw; he said the troops would not be withdraw 'in a fit of pique', but that is not the only way to withdraw them. On the other hand it must be admitted that some realistic observers of the Irish scene like Tomas Mac Giolla of Official Sinn Fein find it difficult to believe that the British ruling class are prepared to sacrifice their interests in their 'first colony'.

In any case the question is: have the British procrastinated too long? Is there still a chance for an agreed independent North or is it to be set up 'in a fit of pique', in defiance of the British, deprived of foreign aid, threatened by the South, torn by civil war between the tribes, finally collapsing in chaos?

A special problem concerns the Common Market. While we take the view that neither Britain nor the Irish Republic should have entered and remained in the capitalist enclave of the EEC, perched uneasily on the tip of the European mainland and shouting 'No surrender' as the rest of the world and history passes it by, nevertheless since both of them are committed to remaining in it presumably until it collapses, it would make no sense for the new Northern state, with no developed links with a wider world, to remain outside. But although in Northern Ireland there was a Yes verdict in the referendum, more than half the electorate did not bother to vote and so this result may not be a clue to future decisions. It is still very much on the cards that an independent North might reject the Market and find no alternative. If this produces immediate economic ill-effects the political results could be disastrous. We think that, in the long run, the Market itself will be economically harmful but it could provide some much-needed short-term help to this small but potentially very explosive region. Catholics and Protestants will only stop competing for jobs when there are enough jobs to go round, a serious economic recession will resurrect old fears and old tribal loyalties.

This, then, seems the gloomy prospect: the British having spent some centuries creating the Irish problem have quite possibly by irresolution and uncertainty now destroyed in the womb the only likely

solution to the problem. On the other hand the North has more than its share of skilled and realistic politicians. Faced with the near-certainty of independence they may be able to draw the political lines in new places. For some time now, of course, there have been contacts between Official Sinn Fein and militant Protestant working-class groups and there are now some signs of genuine discussion across the floor of the Convention. There may still just be time for the British to go leaving behind a relatively peaceful Irish state with real certainty of civil rights for Catholics, without a native machine of repression to replace the old foreign one and with the possibility of the growth of a working-class movement centred on real interests and not bemused by ranting clergymen. It is possible, but a good deal less possible than it was four years ago. There is no other way out of chaos.

H.McC.

THE PRICE OF *NEW BLACKFRIARS*

The cost of printing and distributing *New Blackfriars* has, of course, risen sharply. We have been obliged to ask the English Dominican Province to help us this year to pay our bills. This, for us, is a sign that our price is too low, just as a profit would indicate that our price is too high. From September, therefore, we shall have to:

1. Raise the price of each issue by 5p to 40p.
2. Ask postal subscribers to pay for all twelve of their copies each year instead of only eleven as at present. They will still, however, receive them post-free (a saving of nearly £1). So the new annual subscription will be £4.80—there will have to be similar increases for subscribers overseas.

(You will still be able to have an extra year at the old rate (£3.90 or \$12.50) if you send us this amount before September 1st—regardless of when the renewal of your subscription falls due.)

We reckon that these measures will keep us solvent provided that all our present subscribers stay with us and others keep coming in at a normal rate.

If you want to help us, remember that the best thing you can do is to find a new subscriber.

The Manager.